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NO. 9

PLANET STORIES

THE LORELEI DEATH by NELSON S. BOND  
THIEF OF MARS by HENRY HASSE

WINTER  
1941

# PLANET STORIES

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS  
—THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

## THE LORELEI DEATH

by  
NELSON S. BOND

20c

## THIEF OF MARS

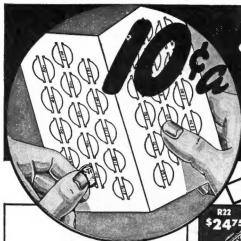
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# ★ PLANET ★

## ★ STORIES ★

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

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### FOUR PLANET NOVELETS

- THE LORELEI DEATH** . . . . . Nelson S. Bond 2  
Far off the beaten space-lanes the Lorelei of the void plied her deadly trade.
- MAN OF THE STARS** . . . . . Sam Moskowitz 30  
From Earth to Alpha Centauri, the Universe acclaimed the Master of the Stars.
- ESPIONAGE IN SPACE** . . . . . Alan Connell 76  
The black armadas of Pluto were massed for battle, and Earth could not be warned.
- MONSTER OF THE ASTEROID** . . . . . Ray Cummings 102  
Win or lose, the take was death for those two new slaves of the Monster.

### FIVE SHORT STORIES

- QUEEN OF THE BLUE WORLD** . . . . . Basil Wells 22  
Blue vegetation, red insect-men . . . Earth was a strange sight to those first Martians.
- A PLANET FOR YOUR THOUGHTS** . . . . . James Norman 44  
In a Universe where thinking was taboo, it was dangerous for Bill Petrie to get ideas.
- THIEF OF MARS** . . . . . Henry Hasse 57  
In limitless space, Earthman and Martian fight the strangest duel the Universe ever saw.
- THE MERCURIAN** . . . . . Frank Belknap Long 69  
Too late Rawley learned of the hideous life that molten, steaming Mercury spawned.
- ZURK** . . . . . Robert O. Lewis 92  
Gentle Marene was next to go when the black space cruiser called for its youth-levy.

### P. S.'s DEPARTMENTS

- FEATURE FLASH** . . . . . 91  
Introducing Sam Moskowitz, PLANET's spotlighted author of the month.
- THE VIZIGRAPH** . . . . . 119  
Kicks and kudos, bombs and bouquets, from the paying customers.

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Volume 1, No. 9



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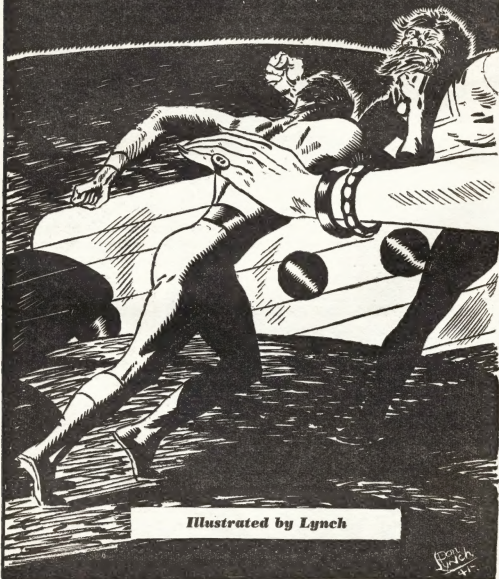
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# THE LORELEI DEATH

by

**NELSON S. BOND**

**Far out in limitless Space she plied her deadly trade . . . a Lorelei of the void, beckoning spacemen to death and destruction with her beautiful siren lure.**



*Illustrated by Lynch*



**C**HIP WARREN stood before an oblong of glass set into one wall of the spaceship *Chickadee II*, stared at what he saw reflected therefrom—and frowned. He didn't like it. Not a bit! It was too—too—

*(Continued on next page)*



He turned away angrily, ripped the offending article from about his neck, and chose another necktie from the rack. This one was brighter, gaudier, much more in keeping with the gaiety of his mood. He emitted a grunt of satisfaction, spun from the mirror to face his two companions triumphantly.

"There!" How do you like *that*?"

Syd Palmer, short and chubby, tow-headed and liquid-blue of eye, always languid save when engaged in the solution of some engineering problem concerned with the space vessel he mothered like a brooding hen, moaned insultingly and forced a shudder.

"Sunspots! Novae! Flying comets! And he wears 'em around his neck!"

"You," Chip told him serenely, "have no appreciation of beauty. What do you think of it, Padre?"

"Salvation" Smith, a tall, gangling scarecrow garbed in rusty black, a lean-jawed, hawk-eyed man with tumbled locks of silver framing his weathered cheeks like a halo, concealed his grin poorly. "Well, my boy," he admitted, "there is *some* Biblical precedent for your—ahem!—clamorous raiment. 'So Joseph made for himself a coat which was of many colors—'"

"Both of you," declared Chip, "give me a pain in the pants! Stick-in-the-muds! Here we are in port for the first time in months, cargo-bins loaded to the gunwales with enough ekalastron to make us rich for life—and you sit here like a pair of stuffed owls!"

"Well, not me! I'm going to take a night off, throw myself a party the likes of which was never seen around these parts. Put a candle in the window, chil-luns, 'cause li'l' Chip won't be home till the wee, sma' hours!"

Syd chuckled.

"O.Q., big shot. But don't get too cozy with any of those joy-joint entertainers. Remember what happened to poor old Dougal MacNeer!"

Salvation said soberly, "Syd's just fooling, my boy. But I *would* be careful if I were you. We're in the Belt, you know. The forces of law and order do not always govern these wild outposts of civilization as well as might be hoped. The planetoids are dens of iniquity, violent and unheeding the words of Him who rules all—"

The old man's lips etched a straight line, reminding Chip that Salvation Smith was not one of those milk-and-water missionaries who espoused the principle of "turning the other cheek" to evildoers. Salvation was not the ordained emissary of any church. A devoutly religious man with the heart of an adventurer, he had taken upon himself the mission of carrying to outland tribes the story of the God he worshipped.

That his God was the fierce Yahveh of the Old Testament, a God of anger and retribution, was made evident by the methods Salvation sometimes employed in winning his converts. For not only was Salvation acknowledged the most pious man in space; he was also conceded to be the best hand with a gun!

Now Chip gave quiet answer. "I know, Padre: I'll be careful. Well, Syd—sure you won't change your mind and come along?"

"No can do, chum. The spaceport repair crew's still smearing this jalopy with ek. Got to stay and watch 'em."

"O.Q. I'm off alone, then. See you later!"

And, whistling, Chip Warren stepped through the lock of the *Chickadee* onto the soil of the asteroid Danae.

DANAEE was, thought Chip as he strolled along briskly toward the town beyond the spaceport, a most presentable hunk of rock. Nice *lucentile* Dome . . . good atmo . . . a fine artificial grav system based on Terra normal. It seemed to be a popular little fueling-stop, too, for its cradle-bins were laden with vessels from every planet in the System, and as he gained the main drag he found himself rubbing shoulders with citizens of every known world. Lumbering, albino Venusians, petal-headed Martians, Jovian runts, greenies from far Uranus, Earthman—all were here.

Quite a likely place, he thought happily, to chuck a brawl. A brilliantly gleaming xenon sign before him welcomed visitors to:

XU'UL'S SOLAREST  
Barroom—Casino—Dancing  
100—Lovely Hostesses—100

He entered, and was immediately de-

lugged by a bevy of charm-gals vying for the privilege of: (1) helping him beat the roulette wheel; (2) helping him drink the house dry, and/or (3) separating him as swiftly as possible from the credits in his money belt.

Chip shook them off, gently but firmly. He wanted a good time, true; but he wanted it solo. The main cabaret was too crowded; he passed through it and another equally blatant room wherein two-score Venusians were straining the structure with a native "sing-stomp," and ended up finally, with a sigh of relief, in a small, dimly-lighted private bar unfrequented by anyone save a bored and listless Martian bartender.

The chrysanthemum-pated son of the desertland roused himself as Chip entered, rustled his petals and piped a ready greeting.

"Welcoom, ssirr! Trrink, please?"

This was more like it! Chip grinned. "Scotch," he said. "*Old Spaceman*. And let's have a new bottle, Curly. None of that doctored swill."

"Of coursrse, ssirr!" piped the barkeep aggrievedly. He pushed a bottle across the mahogany; Chip flipped a golden credit-token back at him.

"Tell me when I've guzzled this, and I'll start work on another." He took a deep, appreciative sniff. "And don't let any of those dizzy dolls in here," he ordered. "I've got a lot of back drinking to catch up on, and I don't want to be disturbed—*Hey!*"

In his alarm, he almost dropped the bottle. For the door suddenly burst open, and in its frame loomed a figure in Space Patrol blues. A finger pointed in Chip's direction and a bull-o'-Bashan voice roared:

"*Stop!* Bartender—grab that man! He's a desperate criminal, wanted on four planets for murder!"

SHOCK momentarily immobilized Chip. Not so the bartender. He was, it seemed, an ardent pacifist. With a bleat of panic fear he scampered from his post, his metallic stilts clattering off in the distance. Chip's accuser moved forward from the shadows; dim light illumined his features. And—

"*Johnny!*" Chip's voice lifted in a note

of jubilant surprise. "Johnny Haldane—you old scoundrel! Where in the void did you drop from?"

The S.S.P. man chuckled and returned Chip's greeting with a bone-grinding handclasp.

"I might ask the same of you, chum! Lord, it's been ages since we've crossed 'jectory! When I saw you meandering across the Casino, you could have knocked me down with a jetblast! What's new? Is old Syd still with you?"

"We're still shipmates. But he's back at the spaceport. The jerry-crew is plating our crate with ek, and—"

"Ek! Plating a private cruiser!" Haldane stared at him in astonishment, then whistled. "Sweet Sacred Stars, you must be filthy with credits to be able to coat an entire ship with ekalastron!"

"You," boasted Chip, "ain't heard nothing yet!" And he told him how they had discovered an entire mountain of the previous new element, No. 97 in the periodic table, on frigid Titania, satellite of far Uranus. "It was touch-and-go for a while," he admitted, "whether we'd be the luckiest three guys in space—or the deadeast! But we passed through the flaming caverns like old Shadrach in the Bible—remember?—and here we are!"\*

Haldane was exuberant. "A mountain of ekalastron!" he gloated. "That's the greatest contribution to spaceflight since Biggs' velocity-intensifier!" It was no overstatement. Element No. 97 was a metal so light that a man could carry in one hand enough to coat the entire hull of a battleship—yet so adamant that a gossamer film of it would deflect a meteor! A metal strong enough to crush diamonds to ash—but so resilient that, when properly treated, it would rebound like rubber! "What are you going to do with it, Chip? Put it on the open market?"

Warren shook his head.

"Not exactly. We talked it over carefully—Syd and Salvation and I—and we decided there are some space-rats to whom it shouldn't be made available. Privateers and outlaws, you know. So we turned control of the mines over to the Space Patrol at Uranus, and visi-

\* "*Shadrach*," PANET STORIES, Fall, 1941.

phoned the Earth authorities we were bringing in one cargo—"

"Visiphoned!" interrupted Haldane sharply. "Did you say visiphoned?"

"Why—why, yes."

"From where?"

"Oh, just before we reached the Belt. We don't have a very strong transmitter, you know. Sa-a-ay, what's all the excitement, pal? Did we do something that was wrong?"

Haldane frowned worriedly. "I don't know, Chip. It wasn't anything *wrong*, but what you did was damned dangerous. For if your message was intercepted, you may have played into the very hands of—the Lorelei!"

CHIP stared at his friend bewilderedly for a moment. Then he grinned. "Hey—I must be getting slightly whacky in my old age. I stand here with an unopened bottle in my hands and hear things! For a minute I thought you said 'Lorelei.' The Lorelei, my space-cop friend, is a myth. An old Teutonic myth about a beautiful damsel who sits out in the middle of a sea on a treacherous rock, combing her golden locks, warbling and luring her fascinated admirers to destruction."

He grunted. "A dirty trick, if you ask me. Catch a snort of this alleged Scotch, pal, and I'll torture your eardrums with the whole, sad story." He started to sing. "*Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten—*"

The Patrolman laid a hand on his arm, silenced him.

"It's not funny, Chip. You've described the Lorelei exactly. That's how she got her name. An incredibly beautiful woman who wantonly lures space-mariners to their death.

"The only difference is that her 'rock' is an asteroid somewhere in the Belt—and she does not sing, she calls! She began exercising her vicious appeal about two months ago, Earth reckoning. Since then, no less than a dozen spacecraft—freighters, liners, even one Patrolship—have fallen prey to her wiles. Their crews have been brutally murdered, their cargos stolen."

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Chip shrewdly. "How do you know about her if the crews have been murdered?"

"She has a habit of locking the controls," explained Haldane, "and setting ravaged ships adrift. Apparently there is no room on her hideout—wherever it is—for empty hulks. One of these ships was salvaged by a courageous cabin-boy who hid from the Lorelei and her pirate band beneath a closetful of soiled linens in the laundry. He described her. His description goes perfectly with less accurate glimpses seen over the visiphones of several score spacecraft!"

Chip said soberly, "So it's no joke, eh, pal? Sorry I popped off. I thought you were pulling my leg. Where do I come into this mess, though?"

"Ekalastron!" grunted Johnny succinctly. "A jackpot prize for any corsair! And you *advertised* a cargo of it over the etherwaves! The Lorelei will be waiting for you with her tongue hanging out. The only thing for you to do, kid, is go back to Jupiter or Io as fast as you can get there. Make the Patrol give you a convey—"

A sudden light danced in Chip Warren's eyes. It was a light Syd Palmer would have groaned to see—for it usually presaged trouble. It was a bright, hard, reckless light.

"Hold your jets, Johnny!" drawled Chip. "Aren't you forgetting one thing? In a couple more hours, I can face the Lorelei and her whole mob—and be damned to them! She can't touch the *Chickadee*, because it's being platted right now!"

Haldane snapped his fingers in quick remembrance.

"By thunder, you're right! Her shells will ricochet off the *Chickadee's* hull like hail off a tin roof. Chip, are you in any hurry to reach Earth? I thought not. What do you say we go after the Lorelei *together*? I'll swear you in as a Deputy Patrolman; we'll take the *Chickadee* and—"

"It's a deal! declared Chip promptly. "You got any idea where this Lorelei's hangout is?"

"That's why I'm here on Danae. I got a tip that one of the Lorelei's men put in here for supplies. I hoped maybe I could single him out somehow, follow him when he jetted for his base, and in that way—*Chip! Look out!*"



HALDANE shouted and moved at the same time. His arm lashed out wildly, thrusting, smashing Chip to the floor in a sprawling heap. The as-yet-unopened bottle was now violently opened; it splintered into a thousand shards against a wall.

Bruised and shaken, Chip lifted his head to see what had caused Johnny's alarm. Even as he did so, the dull gloom of the bar was blazoned with searing effulgence. A lance of flame leaped from the dark, rearward doorway, burst in Johnny Haldane's face!

The Patrolman cried once, a choking cry that died in a mewling whimper. His unused pistol slipped from slackening fingers, and he sagged to the floor. Again crimson lightning laced the shadows; Haldane's body jerked, and the air was raw with the hot, sickening stench of charred flesh.

With an instinct born of bitter years, Chip had come to his knees behind the shelter of the mahogany bar. But now his own flame-pistol was in his hand, and a dreadful rage was mingled with the agony in his heart. Reckless of results, he sprang to his feet, gun spewing livid death into the shadows.

His blast found a mark. For an instant flame haloed a human face drawn in inhuman pain. A heavy, sultry, bestial face, already puckered with one long, ugly scar that ran from right temple to jawbone, now newly scarred with the red brand of Chip's marksmanship.

Then, before Chip could fire again, came the rasp of pounding footsteps. The man turned and fled. Chip bent over his fallen friend, seeking, with hands that did not even feel the heat, fluttering life beneath still smoldering cloth.

He felt—nothing. Johnny was dead.

A snarl of sheer animal rage burst from Chip's lips. Someone would pay for this; pay dearly! Help was coming now. He himself would lead the hue-and-cry that would track a foul murderer to his lair. He spun as the footsteps drew nearer.

"Hurry!" he cried. "This way! Follow me—"

In a bound, he hurdled the bar, lingered at the door only long enough to let the others mark his course. For they had burst into the room, now, a full score of

them. Excited, hard-bitten dogs of space, quick-triggered and willing. Once more he cried for help.

"After him! Come on! He—"

And then—disaster struck! For a reedy voice broke from the van of the mob. The voice of the Martian bartender.

"That's him!" he piped sibilantly. "That's the man! He's a desperate criminal, wanted on four planets for murder! The Patrolman came to arrest him—and now he's murdered the Spacie!"

## II

THE stunning injustice of that accusation came close to costing Chip Warren his life. For a split second he stood motionless in the doorway, gaping lips forming denial. Words which were never to be uttered, for suddenly a raw-boned miner wrenched a Moeller from its holster, leveled and fired.

The hot tongue of death licked hungrily at the young spaceman's cheek, scorched air crackled in his eardrums. Now was no time to squander in vain argument. Chip ducked, spun, and hurled himself through the doorway. There still remained one hope. That he might catch the real murderer, and in that way clear himself. . . .

But the door led to a small, deserted vestibule, and it to an alleyway behind Xu'ul's Solarest. Viewing that maze of byways and passages, Chip knew his hope was futile. There remained but one thing to do. Get out of here. But quick!

It was no hard task. The labyrinth swallowed him as it had engulfed the scarred killer; in a few minutes even the footsteps of his pursuers could no longer be heard. And Chip worked his cautious way back to the spaceport, and to the bin wherein was cradled the *Chickadee*.

Syd Palmer looked up in surprise as Chip let himself in the electro-lock. The chubby engineer gasped, "Salvation, look what the cat drug in! His high-flying Nibs! What's the matter, Chip? Night-life too much for you?"

"Never mind that now!" panted Chip. "Is this tin can ready to roll? Warm the hypos. Were lifting graves—"

Palmer said anxiously, "Now, wait a minute! The men haven't quite finished plating the hull, Chip!"



"Can't help that! We've got important business. In a very few minutes—*Ahh!* There he goes now!" Chip had gone to the *perilous* the moment he entered the ship; now he saw in its reflector that which he had expected. The gushing orange spume of a spaceship roaring from its cradle. "Hurry, Syd!"

There were a lot of things Syd Palmer wanted to ask. He wanted to know *who* went *where*; he was bursting with curiosity about the "important business" which had brought his pal back from town in such a rush; his keen eye also had detected a needle-gun burn on Chip's coat-sleeve. But he was too good a companion to waste time now on such trivia.

"O.Q.," he snapped. "It's your pigeon!"

And he disappeared. They heard his voice calling to the workmen, the scuff of equipment being disengaged from the *Chickadee's* hull, the thin, high whine of warming hypatomics. Salvation looked at Warren quizzically.

"It smells," he ventured gently, "like trouble."

"It is trouble," Chip told him. "Plenty trouble!"

"In that case—" said the old man mildly—"I guess I'd better get the rotor stripped for action." He stepped to the gunnery turret, dropped the fore-irons and stripped their weapon for action. "'Be ye men of peace,'" he intoned, "'but gird firmly thy loins for righteous battle!' Thus saith the Lord God which is Jehovah. Selah!"

Then came Syd's cry from the depths of the hyporoom.

"All set, Chip! Lift gravs!"

Warren's finger found a stud. And with a gusty roar the *Chickadee* rocketed into space on a pillar of flame.

TWO hours later, Chip was still following the bright pinpoint of scarlet which marked the course of his quarry.

In the time that had elapsed since their take-off, he had told his friends the whole story. When he told about the Lorelei, Salvation Smith's seamy old features screwed up in a perplexed grimace. "A woman pirate in the Belt, son? I find it hard to believe. Yet—" And when he described the death of Johnny Haldane, anger smoldered in the missionary's eyes,

and Syd Palmer's hands knotted into tight, white fists. Said Syd, "A man with a scar, eh? Well, we'll catch him sooner or later. And when we do—" His tone boded no good to the man who had slain an old and loved friend.

"As a matter of fact," offered Salvation, "we've got him now. Any time you say the word, Chip. We're faster than he is. We can close in on him in five minutes."

"I know," nodded Warren grimly. "But we won't do it—yet. I'm borrowing a bit of Johnny's strategy. I've been plotting his course. As soon as I'm sure of his destination, we'll take care of *him*. But our first and most vital problem is to locate the Lorelei's hideaway."

Syd said, "That's all right with me, chum. I like a good scrap as much as the next guy. Better, maybe. But this isn't our concern, strictly speaking. What we ought to do is report this matter to the Space Patrol, let them take care of it."

Salvation shook his head.

"That's where you're mistaken, Sydney. This is very much our concern. So much so, in fact, that we dare not make port again until it's cleared up. I think you have forgotten that it is not the scar-faced man who is wanted for the killing of Haldane—but Chip!"

"B-but—" gasped Palmer—"b-but that's ridiculous! Chip and Johnny were old buddies. Lifelong friends!"

"Nevertheless, the circumstantial evidence indicates Chip's guilt. Twenty men saw him standing over Johnny's dead body, with a flame-pistol in his hand. And the barkeep heard Johnny 'arrest' Chip and accuse him of murder!"

Chip said ruefully, "That's right, Syd. It was only a joke, but it backfired. The bartender thought Johnny meant it. He scooted out of there like a bat out of Hades. I'm in it up to my neck unless we can bring back evidence that Scarface actually did the killing. And that may not be so easy."

He stirred restlessly. "But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now our job is to keep this rat in sight. We've gone farther already than I expected we would." He turned to the old preacher. "Where do you think we're going, Padre? Out of the Belt entirely?"

"I've been wondering that myself, son. I don't know for sure, of course, but it looks to me as if we're going for the Bog. If so, you'd better keep a weather-eye peeled."

"The Bog!" Chip had never penetrated the planetoids so deeply before, but he knew of the Bog by hearsay. All men did. A treacherous region of tightly packed asteroids, a mad and whirling scramble of the gigantic rocks which, aeons ago, had been a planet. Few spacemen dared penetrate the Bog. Of those who did dare, few returned to tell the tale. "The Bog! Say! I'd better keep a sharp lookout!"

He turned to the *perilens* once more, fastened an eye to its lens. And then—

"Syd!" he cried. "Salvation! Look! She—she—I!"

He pressed the plunger that transferred the *perilens* image to the central view-screen. And as he did so, a phantom filled the area which should have revealed yawning space, gay with the spangles of a myriad glowing orbs. The vision of an unbelievably beautiful girl, the golden-crowned embodiment of a man's fondest dreaming, eyes wide with an indistinguishable emotion, arms stretched wide in mute appeal.

And from the throats of all came simultaneous recognition.

"The Lorelei!"

AT the same moment came a plea from the enchantress of space through a second medium. For no reason anyone could explain, the ship's *telaudio* awakened to life; over it came to their ears the actual words of the girl:

"Help! Oh, help! Can anyone hear me? Help—"

Even though he knew this to be only a ruse, a deliberate, dastardly trap set for the unwary, Chip Warren's pulse leaped in hot response to that desperate plea. Even with the warning of Johnny Haldane fresh in his memory, some gallantry deep within him spurred him to the aid of this lovely vision. Here was a woman a man could live for, fight for, die for! A woman like no other in the universe.

Then common sense came to his rescue. He wrenched his gaze from the tempting shadow, cried: "Kill that wave-length!

Tune the lens on another beam, Syd!"

Palmer, bedazzled but obedient, spun the dial of the *perilens*. Despite his vastly improved science Man had never yet succeeded in devising a transparent medium through which to view the void wherein he soared; the *perilens* was a device which translated impinging light-waves into a picture of that which lay outside the ship's hull. When or where electrical disturbances existed in space, its frequency could be changed for greater clarity. This was what Syd now attempted.

But to no avail! For it mattered not which cycle he tuned to—the image persisted. Still on the viewscreen that pleading figure beckoned piteously. And still the cabin rang to the prayers of that heart-tugging voice:

"Help! Oh, help! Can anyone hear me? Help—"

Gone, now, was any fascination that thrilling vision might previously have held for Chip Warren. Understanding of their plight dawned coldly upon him, and his brow became dark with anger.

"We're blanketed! Flying blind! Salvation, radio a general alarm! Syd, jazz the hypos to max. Shift trajectory to fourteen-oh-three North and loft . . . fire No. 3 jet. . ."

He had hurled himself into the bucket-shaped pilot's seat; now his fingers played the controls like those of a mad organist. The *Chickadee* groaned from prow to stern, trembled like a tortured thing as he thrust it into a rising spiral.

It was a desperate chance he was taking. Increasing his speed thus, it was certain he would be spotted by the man he had been following; the flaming jets of the *Chickadee* must form a crimson arch against black space visible for hundreds—thousands!—of miles. Nor was there any way of knowing what lay in the path Chip thus blindly chose. Titanic death might loom on every side. But they had to fight clear of this spot of blindness, clear their instruments. . . .

And then it came! A jarring concussion that smashed against the prow of the *Chickadee* like a battering ram. Chip flew headlong out of his bucket to spreadeagle on the heaving iron floor. He heard, above the grinding plaint of shattered

steel the bellowing prayer of Salvation Smith:

"We've crashed! 'Into Thy hands, O Lord of old—'"

Then Syd's angry cry, "Crashed, hell! He's smashed us with a tractor-blast!"

Chip stared at his companion numbly.

"But—but that's impossible! We're plated with ek! A tractor-cannon couldn't hurt us—"

"Half-plated!" howled Syd savagely. "And those damn fools started working from the stern of the *Chickadee*! We're vulnerable up front, and that's where he got us! In a minute this can will be leaking like a sieve. I'll get out bulgers. Hold 'er to her course, Chip!"

He dove for the lockers wherein were hung the space-suits, tore them hastily from their hangers. Chip again spun the *perilens* vernier. No good! No space . . . no stars . . . just a beautiful phantom crying them to certain doom. By now he was aware that from a dozen sprung plates air was seeping, but he fought down despair. While there remained hope, a man had to keep on fighting.

He scrambled back into the bucket-seat, experimented with controls that answered sluggishly. Salvation had sprung to the rotor-gun, was now angrily jerking its lanyard, lacing the void with death-dealing bursts that had no mark. The old man's eyes were brands of fire, his white hair clung wetly to his forehead. His rage was terrible to behold.

"Yes, truly shall I destroy them!" he cried, "'who loose their stealth upon me like a thief from the night—'"

Then suddenly there came a second and more frightful blow. The straining *Chickadee* stopped as though pole-axed by a gigantic fist. Stopped and shuddered and screamed in metal agony. This time inertia flung Chip headlong, helpless, into the control racks. Brazen studs took the impact of his body; crushing pain banded about his temples, and a red wetness ran into his eyes, blurring and blinding him, burning.

For an instant there flamed before him a universe of incandescent starts, weaving, shimmering, merging. The vision of a woman whose hair was a golden glory . . .

After that—nothing!

### III

FROM a billion miles away, from a bourne unguessable thousands of light-years distant, came the faint, far whisper of a voice. Nearer and nearer it came, and ever faster, till it throbbed upon Chip's eardrums with booming savagery. "—coming to, now. Good! We'll soon find out—"

Chip opened his eyes, too dazed, at first, to understand the situation in which he found himself. Gone was the familiar control-turret of the *Chickadee*, gone the bulger into which he had so hastily clambered. He lay on the parched, rocky soil of a—a something. A planetoid, perhaps. And he was surrounded by a motley crew of strangers: scum of all the planets that circle the Sun. . . .

Then recollection flooded back upon him, sudden and complete. The chase . . . the call of the fateful Lorelei . . . the crash! New strength, born of anger, surged through him. He lifted his head.

"My—my companions?" he demanded weakly.

The leader of those who encircled him, a mighty hulk of a man, massive of shoulder and thigh, black-haired, with an unshaven blue jaw, raven-bright eyes and a jutting, aquiline nose like the beak of a hawk, loosed a satisfied grunt.

"Ah! Back to normal, eh, sailor? Damn near time!"

Climbing to his feet sent a swift wave of giddiness through Chip—but he managed it. He fought down the vertigo which threatened to overwhelm him, and confronted the big man boldly.

"What," he stormed, "is the meaning of this?"

The giant stared at him for a moment, his jaw slack. Then his raven-bright eyes glittered; he slapped a trunklike thigh and guffawed in boisterous mirth.

"Hear that?" he roared to his companions. "Quite a guy, ain't he? 'What's the meanin' o' this?' he asks! Game little fightin' cock, hey?" Then he sobered abruptly, and a grim light replaced the amusement in his eyes. Here was not a man to be trifled with, Chip realized. His tone assumed a biting edge. "The meanin' is, my bucko," he answered mirthlessly, "that you've run afoul o' your last reef.

Unless you have a sane head on your shoulders, and you're willing to talk fast and straight!"

"Talk?"

"Don't stall. We've already unloaded your bins. We found it. And a nice haul, too. Thanks for lettin' us know it was on the way." The burly one chuckled coarsely. "We'd have took it, anyway, but you helped matters out by comin' to us."

Johnny Haldane had been right, then. Chip remembered his friend's ominous warning. "—if your message was intercepted, you may have played into the hands of—" He said slowly, "Then you *are* the Lorelei's men?"

"The who? Never mind that, bucko. just talk. That ekalastron—where did it come from?"

And it occurred to Warren suddenly that although the big man *did* hold the whip hand, he was still not in possession of the most important secret of all! While the location of the ekalastron mine remained a secret, a deadlock existed.

"And if I won't tell?" he countered shrewdly.

"Why, then, sailor—" The pirate leader's hamlike fists tightened, and a cold light glinted in his eyes—"why, then I guess maybe I'll have to beat it out o' you!"

HE took a step forward. Chip, still unsteady on his feet, but feeling his strength renew itself with each passing moment, braced for rough encounter. But the moment of contest was not yet. For even as the big man's companions drew back, grinning evilly, to form a ring about the pair, rose a familiar voice from behind Chip.

"Hold! 'Stay now the hand of wrath, yea, shalt thou restrain even thine arm raised in striking lest His vengeance smite thee into dust!'"

A look of swift, incredulous dismay, sweeping across the giant's face, vanished in an expression of unholy glee.

"Salvation!" he exclaimed exultantly. "It's Salvation Smith! So we meet again!"

The circle parted, admitting newcomers. Syd and the old missionary and the pirates who had dragged them from the

broken *Chickadee*. Chip thought that never before had he been so glad to lay eyes on his two comrades. Events had followed so swiftly that he had had no time to feel concern for them, but it was a relief to find them alive and unharmed.

Nor had the crash sapped either of his valor. Syd's face, was stubbornly determined, and Salvation breathed raging defiance. He glanced once at Chip, as if to assure himself the young spaceman was uninjured, then turned to their captor.

"Aye, Salvation Smith!" he thundered. "And how came you to this new rat's nest, Blacky Jordan?"

Blacky Jordan! The name touched the fringes of Chip Warren's memory, tugged there fretfully. Then came recollection. Of course! Blacky Jordan had been the chief lieutenant of Balder Sorenson . . . the only one of Sorenson's space-preying gang to escape when Lt. Russ Bartlett of the Solar Postal Department had smashed the mail-robbers off Eros two years ago!

The filthiest kind of a scoundrel, Blacky Jordan. A treacherous, back-stabbing murderer who found no methods too low to achieve the results he desired. Chip understood, now, why only one small, frightened boy had ever returned to tell of the Lorelei's gang.

But—the Lorelei? Where was she? And in what way had Jordan earned the allegiance of a girl like—

He snapped out of it abruptly. For Jordan's chunky frame had stiffened, his raven-bright eyes narrowed to meager slits, and he was moving forward, hands half-clenched at his sides in an anticipatory hunger. His voice was low and hard.

"Salvation Smith! The psalm-singin' dog who ran me out of Mars Central! I always said some day I'd get even for that! Well, now's the time!"

And suddenly he lunged, hands clawing for the older man's throat. But they never found their mark. For, swiftly as he moved, Chip Warren moved faster still. A step forward, a foot outthrust, an arm upraised, spinning the man . . .

"So!" bellowed Jordan, "So you're still lookin' for trouble, bucko? O.Q. I'll take care o' that mealy-mouthed space-parson later!"

He turned on Chip viciously; the blow he directed at the smaller man's head

would have felled an ox. But Chip was no ox. He was like a panther as he gave with the blow, bobbed, weaved in underneath Jordan's flailing arm, and came up with both fists driving like pistons.

A right to the heart, a short, jabbing left into the mid-section, dropping the bigger man's guard—then a crashing right to the jaw! And—

Jordan went down!

**B**UT not yet had Chip Warren fully recovered from the effects of his recent shock. His blows had the power to hurt and sting, but they lacked their accustomed effectiveness.

Scarcely had he touched the ground than Blacky Jordan was up again, his beefy face a red mask of rage, his voice a roaring thunder. Like an unleashed behemoth he hurled himself upon his slighter antagonist, bullying Chip back by sheer bulk, smashing down Chip's guard with sledge-hammer blows.

Even so, Chip gave more than he took. Even as he retreated, his fists continued to dance in for stinging slashes at the other man's face, heart, wind. And had the locale of their meeting been a sporting ring, even yet he might have emerged the victor. But there was little sporting spirit in those who watched.

The foot of a pirate gangster slipped between Chip's legs, tripping him. As he stumbled backward, off balance, the tentacular paw of a Martian whipped about his shielding arm. He was completely at the mercy of the charging Jordan. Mercy was a word the blackhaired one did not know. With a bellow of triumph, he smashed both fists, left, right, left again, into Chip's unprotected face. The blows throbbed home like burning rivets. A dizzy nausea assailed Chip; he felt the rocky soil springing up to meet him.

And now it was Syd who, angered beyond discretion, would have leaped forward to take up his friend's fight. But he could not. A dozen arms locked him in a vise of flesh; he was held motionless, straining futilely, as Jordan transferred his attentions to Salvation Smith.

This was no battle at all. Given a gun, the old war-horse was a match for any man in the System. But age had taken its toll of his strength; Jordan's first spite-

filled punch smashed down his feeble defenses. In no time at all he was on the ground, stunned, bruised, shaken, unable to defend himself even against the lashing kicks of the pirate's boots. And as he drained the dregs of his vengeance, Blacky Jordan laughed.

"I've waited a long time for this, Salvation Smith!" he gloated. "You kicked me out of Mars; now it's my turn—"

With deliberate savagery he raised his thick, lead-soled boot, buried it in the old man's side. And again. And yet again. Salvation moaned and tried to rise, failed. Chip Warren, shaking off the dark clouds that had blinded him, got to his knees uncertainly, managed one lurching step toward the pirate. And then—

"*For shame!*" A voice that must be born of delirium. A voice lilting-clear as crystal, golden as dawn, valiant and proud as a banner flying. "You—you monster! I always knew you were a cur, Blacky Jordan, but I didn't know you'd stoop to this—"

And through the circle burst a figure Chip knew . . . the figure of a girl with the face of an angel. But an avenging angel now, with her halo of golden hair cascading about her shoulders, her warm, ripe lips tightset with scorn and anger. Like a dancing gleam she raced between Jordan and his victim; her white hand raised once and descending stingingly upon the pirate's cheek . . . then, with a little cry of sympathy, she was on her knees beside Salvation Smith.

It was—the girl of the lens! The Lorelei!

#### IV

**W**HAT happened then was not in any wise comprehensible to Chip Warren.

Had Blacky Jordan turned viciously on the latecomer, striking her down as brutally as he had Chip and Salvation—that would have been understandable. Or had he meekly begged forgiveness—that, too, Chip could have understood. For the girl was—had to be!—either one of two things. Servant or mistress of the pirate chieftain.

But Jordan did neither of these things. Instead, he fingered his cheek where it



flamed dull scarlet against brown, and his eyes were cloudy pools of anger and some contrasting emotion Chip could not name. His fingers twitched, his mouth worked. Then something like a shrug stirred his shoulders; he turned to his silently watching followers.

"Well—what are you standin' around here for? You got work to do, ain't you? Well, get goin', then!"

With obedient alacrity the mob dispersed. Chip had his first clear, unobstructed view of the terrain upon which the *Chickadee* had crashed. He saw that his guess had been a good one. It was an asteroid. And judging by the swift dip of the horizon, the visible arch of the distant landscape, a rather small one. Barely a mile in diameter. A mere sliver in the colossal débris of the Belt.

But, then, whence came its gravity? Though he wore no bulger he felt comfortably secure on this tiny fragment of matter. And how did a floating rock of this size maintain an atmosphere of Earth normal?

These were perplexing questions, but there was no opportunity now to solve them. For the girl had helped Salvation to his feet, had lent him a shoulder in support, and now was moving away. Jordan glared at her pettishly.

"An' just where do you think you're goin'?"

The Lorelei's gaze did not meet his, it passed clear through him as if he did not exist. Her voice was icy cold.

"Stand aside, please! I'm taking him below."

And again Blacky Jordan backed down! As before, his manner toward the girl was baffling. It was peremptory, yet at the same time conciliatory; at once truculent and submissive! He gave in with a graceless shrug.

"Oh, all right! Take 'em *all* below. I can't waste any more time on 'em right now. But I'll see 'em again later. Especially *you*—" He jerked his head toward Salvation, then stared thoughtfully at Chip—"and you, too, bucko. Yeah. Me and you is goin' to have a nice little talk later on."

And he stalked away. Hope flared in Chip that now he might find a chance to improve their lot. Not one of the men

was guarding them. Only this girl, and she was preoccupied with Salvation—

But—his hope was vain. No gaoler needs guard prisoners immured on a desert isle. Their weapons had been stripped from them, their ship was a tangled heap of wreckage. And there was no other space vessel in sight.

Chip looked at Syd. Palmer's shake of the head confessed an equal bewilderment. Perhaps the answer to this mad situation lay where the girl led. The two spacemen followed.

THEIR way took them into a tunnel which sloped for a few hundred yards into the earth, then debouched into a small cavern. Into the far wall of this was set a grilled gateway which, when opened by the girl, revealed—an elevator. Into this she helped Salvation. Chip and Syd, delayed by the same doubt, held back. The girl, noting their hesitation, addressed them directly for the first time.

"This way," she said. "Come on! Quickly!"

Chip said suspiciously, "Just a minute, sister. How do we know this isn't a trick of some kind—"

Her eyes flamed electric-blue, and her voice cracked like a whp.

"Don't be a fool! Get in here—and hurry! When he thinks it over he may change his mind. We're getting away with murder!"

It didn't make sense, but there was nothing to gain by lingering here. The two entered the conveyance, the girl pressed a button and concealed motors whined as they began to descend swiftly. But the last word was still Chip's.

"That's just what you *have* been getting away with," he acknowledged grimly, "but you're nearing the end of your rope now—Lorelei!"

In the semidarkness, the girl's eyes were pools of liquid surprise.

"Getting away with—end of—I don't understand?"

"Murder!" gritted Chip. "Murder and piracy. A dozen spacecraft within the past two months, scuttled and every man of their crews done to death. But your siren-song won't tempt many more, Lorelei. The Space Patrol is on to your alluring little trap. You may finish *us* off, but the

battle fleet will find you eventually, and when it does—"

He didn't finish his prophecy, for the elevator came to rest; the door opened. And peering in at them, hurrying forward to greet them and take the sagging weight of the aged missionary from the girl's arm, was a white-haired old man.

"Alison!" he cried. "You're back safely! Thank the Lord! You shouldn't have gone above. It's dangerous, child, dangerous to mingle with such scoundrels! Who are these—?"

And then the girl did a surprising thing. A particularly surprising thing, inasmuch as a few minutes ago, facing Blacky Jordan like a golden Valkyr, her boldness had won from Chip Warren a grudging admiration. She fled to the old man's side, buried her face in his shoulder and cried:

"Daddy—this piracy, this murder and bloodshed—these men think *I* am part of it!"

The old man said, "Now, now, dear!" soothingly, and glared reproof at his visitors. "There must be some mistake—" And to the others he suggested, "Gentlemen, will you come with me? We must get to the bottom of this."

Their journey this time was short. Through one door to a series of warm, well-lighted chambers. But stupefying. Because here, at what Chip realized must be the very core of the tiny planetoid, had been carved from solid rock quarters that matched, in efficiency and luxury, any elaborate dwelling on the face of a civilized planet!

Comfortable living chambers were here, furnished in excellent taste. And, through the doorways leading to adjacent rooms Chip glimpsed white-tiled compartments wherein were visible rows upon rows of beakers and flasks, retorts, motor-units, experimental apparatus. Laboratories, beautifully arranged and maintained! He stared at his host in astonishment.

"How—?" he stammered. "Who—?"

"Will you be seated, gentlemen?" suggested the older man. "There! Now, let us get to the root of this frightful affair. You accused my daughter of implication—?"

Chip said, "We—we had ample reason to, sir. First let me introduce myself and my friends. I am Chip Warren . . . this

is my friend and shipmate, Syd Palmer . . . and this is Salvation Smith. . . ."

"Salvation Smith! Not really? I've heard of you, Padre," said the old man. "You were engaged in bringing spiritual light to the Martian outlanders at about the time I was supplying Mars with a more—er—mechanical type—"

Salvation lifted his head suddenly.

"Grayland Blaine! Dr. Grayland Blaine. The greatest 'atophysicist in the System!'"

"Thank you, Padre. You flatter me. And this is my daughter, Alison. But now—to business. You were saying—?"

"Tell him, Chip," bade Salvation. "I don't know how Dr. Blaine and his daughter got involved with Blacky Jordan. But I know one thing—that they're as innocent of any wrongdoing as any pair alive."

Chip needed no second invitation. A great gladness was upon him that the girl now listening to his words was not what he had feared and believed. Eagerly he embarked on his story, told them everything from the moment of his meeting Haldane to the moment Alison Blaine had so fortuitously appeared in time to save Salvation.

But if his spirits were high, those of his listeners seemed to sink lower with each word. When he had finished, a gloom hung heavily upon Dr. Blaine's brow. He looked at his daughter and sighed.

"It is worse than we feared and suspected, my dear. They *are* using my inventions, but not for the benefit to mankind I intended. Instead, they have distorted them to their own foul purposes. And we are helpless to stop them!"

"Your—your inventions?" repeated Syd Palmer.

DR. BLAINE nodded somberly. "Yes. You say you saw Alison's face in your *perilens*? And heard her voice calling for help?"

"On every cycle! That was the amazing part. Every wavelength carried her image, and her voice came through in spite of the fact that the audio was not turned on."

"But naturally," assented the old man. "That is the principle on which it operates. I call it the 'omniwave.' It is a new method of superimposing sound and light waves on receptors in such a way

that they can be transmitted through any medium over a series of overlapping wavelengths ranging from 30 kilocycles down to 4,000 Angstrom units. It requires only a supersensitive iconoscope of my own devising, coupled with radiant-projectors—"

"It blanketed," Chip told him, "every instrument on our ship. We tried to tune it out so we could see where we were going, but it was impossible. The result was we were easy prey for Jordan's gang. They clamped a tractor on us, crashed us on this asteroid. Only thing I don't understand," he frowned, "is how we managed to get within their range. I was blind-flying, true. But I forejettied the *Chickadee* to avoid the possibility of ramming any asteroid—"

Again Dr. Blaine shook his head.

"You would have had a hard time avoiding this one, my boy. Because, you see, it was not sitting stationary. It was moving toward you."

"Moving toward— Oh, no, Doctor! Impossible. The asteroids follow a clockwise course about the Sun!"

"Not this one," denied the old man. "Because this is no ordinary asteroid, Warren. This whole rock, this mass of matter in space—is a navigable spaceship!"

Salvation's jaw dropped open. He said in hallowed tones, "Surely the Lord worketh in wondrous ways His marvels to unfold!" You said—a spaceship, Dr. Blaine?"

Blaine's shoulders drooped dispiritedly.

"Yes. This is the great invention on which I have labored in secret for years. The invention which I had hoped would prove a glorious boon to man. The construction of that one type of space-voyager which could be destroyed by only a most devastating catastrophe.

"As you all know well, the major hazard of spaceflight is that the craft employed, however strongly constructed, is ever but a mote as compared with those hurtling celestial bodies it may chance to meet in space. Thus the efforts of science have ever been to cut down the collision risk. The Moran deflector . . . the permalloy hood . . . the automatic warp . . . these are a few of the devices used. With some success, yes; but—there are failures, too. Each year more than a hundred ships

crash headlong, or are crashed into by rogue asteroids, meteor swarms, bits of cosmic debris of mountainous size."

"Patrol lightships have been placed in those locations recognized to be most dangerous to space travel. But you know that the toll taken by relentless Nature on these gallant ships is terrible.

"I therefore dreamed that Man might build a gigantic lightship from a solid asteroid! A rock so large that no tiny meteor could damage it, one of sufficient mass to repel the advance of rogue asteroids. To the accomplishment of this I bent my efforts. You are within the result."

"You mean," Chip demanded, "this entire planetoid is equipped with rockets? It can fly itself?"

"Exactly. With an atoblast my laborers hollowed out living quarters, control chambers. At one-eighth mile intervals jets have been installed in the asteroid. These are fed from the central explosion chamber. In addition, gravity and atmosphere of Earth normal constant are maintained, when the planetoid is at rest, by means of energy-warp accumulators."

The old man sighed. "It was a fond dream. But just as it neared fruition, came tragedy. Blacky Jordan's pirate gang, by sheer chance, landed on the *Aurora*—the name of my cosmic craft. Trusting fool that I am, I made them welcome, took them into my refuge and proudly displayed its mechanism."

Chip nodded.

"I can guess the rest. They took over. Since then they've held you prisoners here, and used this as their base. And the image of Alison—"

"A recording," explained Blaine, "made when she attempted, vainly, to call for help. Jordan was clever enough to realize its value. Now whenever he sights a craft which he wishes to ravage, he tempts it within range by playing the visual record. When the unwary ship is drawn near enough, it finds itself blanketed, as you were. And Jordan then smashes the *Aurora* into the hapless vessel."

Salvation ventured, "And your laborers? Dead?"

"All of them. Jordan follows the ancient principle of all unprincipled rogues. 'Dead men tell no tales.' The only reason

Alison and I are still alive is that he fears he may some day need my knowledge. And Alison—"

The girl spoke for herself. Softly enough, but her eyes were brittle and challenging. "Alison lives because the brutish fool fancies himself as a Don Juan."

It was a complete giveaway that this simple statement should strike the spark of Chip's anger more vehemently than any other. His brow darkened, and he came to his feet with a roar.

"What! You mean that he actually dares—"

"Steady, son!" That was Salvation Smith. Age might have taken its toll of the missionary's strength, but not his recuperative powers. The old man seemed to have completely recovered from the effects of the beating he had taken a short while before. There was even the thin ghost of a smile upon his lips.

"The young lady seems to be quite capable of taking care of herself. Our job, as I see it, is to wrest control of the *Aurora* from Blacky Jordan and his gang. Dr. Blaine, surely you must have some plan?"

Dr. Blaine shook his head miserably. "I fear not. I built the *Aurora*; I know every nook and cranny of her. But it does me no good. Jordan is complete master of the vital working parts of the asteroid. Alison and I are virtual prisoners in this one, harmless compartment, separated by tons of solid rock from the machine chambers. If we could regain control of those rooms, of course—"

"Well," demanded Chip belligerently, "why can't we? There are five of us now. Together we should be able to force our way into—"

"Into" Dr. Blaine told him morbidly, "an early grave. You underestimate Jordan's savagery, Warren. Alison and I have lived on sufferance only. You and your companions have continued to exist only because you have a secret he would give much to possess. Let us make one hostile move, and he will have no compunctions whatsoever against destroying us all. And he has both the men and the weapons with which to do it."

"Nevertheless," gritted Chip, "there must be *some* way. And by the Seven Sacred Stars—"

"Shhh!" hissed Syd warningly. "Someone outside!"

True, the hum of the elevator had sounded and ceased. Now the latch clicked, and one of Jordan's men stared at them suspiciously from the doorway. His eyes swept the group, singled out Chip Warren.

"You," he said. "Come along. The chief wants to see you."

## V

AS Dr. Blaine had said, the apartment in which he and Alison had been isolated was far removed from the vital power-rooms of the *Aurora*. Chip's guide prodded him surlily into the elevator, to the surface, across a quarter mile of ore-reddened rock, then down into a similar shaft. But this time as they descended in an elevator Chip could hear an incessant humming murmur betraying the presence of nearby, tremendous hypatomic motors.

Stepping from the cage he stood in a corridor upon which opened a number of doors clearly marked POWER ROOM, STORAGE, SUPPLIES. But it was through an unmarked doorway his captor motioned him. Chip found himself in a huge, luxuriously appointed control-turret, at the plot-desk of which lounged Blacky Jordan. Another man, back turned to Chip, was studying the dial controls.

Jordan nodded to Chip's guide. "O.Q., you can beat it now. Well, Phipps—is this the guy?"

"Phipps" turned, and at the sight of him an unforgotten flame of hatred rekindled in Warren's heart. For the man's face was newly swathed in bandages, but by the apish droop of his shoulders, the malignant gleam that darted from his tiny deepset eyes, by the cicatriced twist of his partly covered lips, Chip knew him. It was Scarface, the eavesdropper of Xu'ul's Solarest, murderer of Johnny Haldane, the living bait by which they had been lured into this trap.

Chip's breath panted from his lips in a tiny explosion of rage. He took two swift paces forward, then stopped, staring into the ugly maw of Jordan's leveled Moeller.

"Hold it, bucko," drawled Jordan. "Don't start nothin' you can't finish. Grab

a seat, there, and calm down." Then, as Chip sank impotently into the designated chair, "There, that's better. No reason we three can't be chummy, is there? Like bugs in a rug." He chuckled and turned again to Phipps. "Then it is him, huh?"

Scarface nodded, his voice muffled beneath layers of bandage. "It's him, Chief. A whole mountain of ekalastron, he said. Only I didn't hear him say where. And after that the Spacie was going to swear him in as a deputy, and they was going to come hunting for us—"

"Yeah, I know. Only he got a sort of a surprise when he done it. Didn't you, sailor?"

Chip said in a voice that he struggled to keep level. "The game's not played yet, Jordan. I've still got a hand to draw to."

"Sure," grinned the pirate chieftain, "but you got yours to get, and I've already got mine. Aces full. Now look here, bucko—" He bent forward, and his voice assumed a wheedling tone—"They ain't no sense in us two scrapping. We got off on the wrong foot together, that's all's the trouble with us. You ain't got nothin' against me, and I ain't got nothin' against you. To tell the truth, I kinda like you. You got guts. I got respect for anybody that'll stand up and swap punches even when the deck's stacked against him. Now, you strike me as being a right sensible guy. I've got a little proposition to make you—"

He paused, and Chip's eyes narrowed as every nerve in his body quivered with raw dislike. But he capped the rising flood within him. It was wisdom in this crisis to test every opening which presented itself.

"Go on," said Chip. "I'm listening."

"Good! Now, you just made the biggest discovery any man in space ever made. A mountain of ekalastron. Right?"

"I'm not saying," parried Chip. "But if I did?"

"Oh, you *did*, bucko! Well, listen. Here's the proposition. I got a nice little organization here. Fifty good men. Maybe they ain't the cream o' society—" Jordan chuckled—"but they're as good fightin' men as ever lifted graves."

"I've also got, thanks to Doc Blaine's dopiness, the biggest, toughest, hardest-to-

lick spaceship that ever fired a jet. It can stand up against any cruiser in the fleet. Matter of fact, the only thing that keeps us from becomin' the most powerful pirate organization in Space is the Patrol. The *Aurora* could fight off one, two, maybe as much as a half dozen of their battle ships—but you know how Spacies are. When they get all hot and bothered about something, they don't mess around with small-time stuff. They call out the whole damn fleet. And I'm frank in admittin', bucko, that's why we've had to hide out so far, concealin' ourselves in the Bog like we was just an ordinary asteroid."

"So?" said Chip.

"So how's about you and me throwin' in together? You tell me where this here mine of ekalastron is. We'll fly out there and work it and get enough ek to armor-plate this whole damn asteroid."

"This whole—I" Warren started. What proposition he had expected from the outlaw he did not know, but certainly it was nothing so magnificently fantastic as this. And yet—his brow cudgeled. Was it so fantastic, after all? Every chemist knew that element No. 97 was one of the most malleable of all metals. A thousand tons of it, girdling the *Aurora* to a thickness of only a cobweb veil, would undoubtedly convert the asteroid into an impregnable battleship, a superdreadnaught that could defy the combined assault of every Patrolship in the void!

**B**LACKY JORDAN was staring at him eagerly. "Well, how about it, bucko? It's a good idea, ain't it?"

Chip said tentatively, "It's an—idea, all right. But how about me, Jordan? What do I get out of this?"

The burly one slapped his thigh delightedly. "Now you're beginning to talk like a man, bucko! That's the sort of thing I like to hear. What do you get out of this? I'll tell you. I already said I kinda like you, didn't I? Well—I like you enough that I'd like to see you become my Number One man. Throw in with me and you'll be the big boss around here . . . next to Blacky Jordan, o' course. Together we'll be an unbeatable combination."

"And the others? The Blaines and Syd Palmer and Salvation?"



"The Blaines will stay with us. You never can tell when we're going to need the old man's brains again. And the girl—well—" Jordan grinned—"She's a bit of a hellcat, but I been workin' on her, and she'll come around in time. I got plans for that girl, bucko. Who knows, maybe one of these days she may listen to reason and throw in with us? And then you and me and her will be a trio. As for Palmer—you can do whatever you want. If he'll play ball, O.Q. If he won't, we'll land him safe on some outpost. He don't know enough to do us any harm, and by the time he finds his way back to civilization we'll have what we want."

"And Salvation?"

Blacky Jordan's good humor vanished. A dark light glittered in his eyes. "Well, now, I hope we ain't goin' to have no trouble about that, bucko. But I got an old score to settle with Salvation Smith. Only—only, maybe if you're willin' to be agreeable, I'll even go so far as to meet you halfway on *that*, too. Well, what do you say?"

Chip knew what he wanted to say. The answer had trembled on his tongue from the moment the outlaw started speaking. Only a violent effort of will-power had kept him from surging to his feet, hurling his defi into the pirate's face. But that way, he realized, lay madness. So far Blacky Jordan had been astonishingly conciliatory. But Chip knew, as did the pirate, that if this peaceful means of gaining his end were unavailing, Jordan had at his disposal other means of learning the secret he desired.

Chip was bolstered, too, by one bit of knowledge Blacky Jordan did not possess: that the ekalastron mine was *already* occupied by a strongly armed corps of the Uranus Space Control. But it would not do to reveal this now. Neither would it do to pledge false allegiance nor proffer blunt refusal. The only other alternative was to stall for time. This Chip did. He stroked his jaw thoughtfully.

"This is pretty sudden," he hesitated. "I hardly know what to say, Jordan. Could I have a little while to think it over?"

Jordan rose from his desk with the toothy grin of one who sees his plan already half accomplished.

"Sure, bucko! Take all the time you want. Take a half an hour if you like. I got a few things to do, anyhow. I'll just roll along and take care of them. You stay here and make up your mind. And, Phipps—you stay here and keep an eye on Mr. Warren," Jordan grinned. "Not that I don't trust you, you understand, bucko. You and me's going to be buddies. But you might want to play double sol, or somethin'. Well—see you later!" And with a wide anticipatory grin on his lips, the big man lumbered from the room.

But barely had he disappeared than happened that which was most stunning of all which had befallen Chip Warren. Phipps, with an agility surprising in one so apishly squat, scurried across the room, and listened until the whine of the elevator advised him the coast was clear. Then he spun to Chip.

"Listen, Warren," he husked, "I gotta talk fast; are you for his plan or ain't you?"

Warren stared at the man in numb astonishment. "Why, I—I—" he faltered. "What are you getting at?"

"Because if you're for his plan *and* him," hurried Scarface, "I'm through talking. But if you're for his plan *and* against him, maybe you and I can do a little private business?" Chip was still puzzled.

"Private business?"

"Strictly *ongtree-new*," grinned Phipps evilly, "I don't mind telling you, Warren, I'm fed up with the way I been kicked around by Blacky Jordan. I'm supposed to be his right hand man, but I'm one of those right hands that never knows what the left hand's doing. I run all the risks, like going into civilization for supplies and taking care of that spacecop, for instance, and Jordan gets all the gravy. Not only that, but he'd rat on me in a minute if it would put one bean in his soup. Like he just done a few minutes ago; talking about making you his chief partner when I've been his buddy and done his dirty work for years.

"Well, I'm sick of it, see? And I'm pulling out. What I want to know is—if I take care of Blacky Jordan, can you and me make a dicker like the one he propositioned you on?"

## VI

CHIP stared at the man with a sort of sick distaste in his mouth. He did not like Blacky Jordan. The outlaw was coarse, brutal, bestial. But it had to be said to Jordan's credit that his villainy was at least open and aboveboard; not such treacherous, skulking infamy as this.

Chip said contemptuously, "Aren't you taking an awful chance, Phipps? Suppose I were to tell Jordan about this proposition of yours?"

Phipps' leer was the more vicious because it marred only the visible half of his face.

"I ain't taking no chance, Warren. 'Cause if you're agreeable, I'll set the wheels moving. I've got *my* followers, too. There won't be no Blacky Jordan to worry about. If you *ain't* agreeable, well—" He patted the Moeller holster at his side with a sinister sort of affection—"I can always tell Blacky you tried to escape, you know."

Chip Warren could restrain himself no longer. For fifteen minutes he had held his ever-fierce emotions in check. Now his lips spat venomous loathing. "Why, you—you rat!" he growled. "You filthy, contemptible cur! I'd as soon form a partnership with a Venusian marsh-snake! Oh! So *that's* your game!"

He cried aloud in swift alarm as Scarface, stung by his scathing refusal, reached for his Moeller. Like a striking serpent the squat man's hands darted to his holster, but Chip, too, was in motion, and even more swiftly. The young spaceman left his feet in a diving tackle; his shoulder smashed Phipps' knees bruisingly, his clawing hand locked around the pirate's straining wrist.

They hit the floor with a crash, struggled there silently, writhing like octopi locked in deadly embrace. Phipps brought his knee up hard into Warren's groin, shaking Chip with a sudden, violent nausea. But still Chip clung desperately to the other man's wrist. The adrenalin of emotion pumping through his veins broomed away his weakness; he lashed out again and yet again for his antagonist's chin, putting every ounce of power behind his blows.

But somehow Phipps' hand managed to

to wriggle free. In that second, death menaced Chip with flaming certainty. An instant more and the world he knew would have dissolved forever in coruscant oblivion. But once more, with desperate savagery, his fist sought his antagonist . . . and this time found its mark! A sledge of pain shattered Chip's knuckles. He heard a rasping grate of bone as the scarred one's jaw collapsed. A gust of withering heat scorched past his shoulder, and Phipps flew backward across the room. His head hit the angle of a metal cabinet. There came the sickening crunch of yielding bone. Phipps' body shuddered once—and lay still.

Chip pulled himself to his feet, heart pounding with furious triumph. Then suddenly the light of battle died from his eyes, and a look of horror took its place as he realized what he had done. Never in this world would he convince Blacky Jordan that Phipps' own treachery had brought about his death. The pirate's retribution for this deed would be swift and violent.

The fat was in the fire now. Somehow he must warn his friends. Chip spun, stared avidly at the controls about him, found the one he sought: a telaudio unit. There was not time to single out the key which would give him a private line to Dr. Blaine's quarters. He depressed the all-circuit plunger, cried desperately, "Dr. Blaine! Salvation! Can you hear me?"

An answer came back instantly in Syd's voice. "We hear you, Chip. What's up?"

"Find some way to defend yourselves! And hurry! I've just fought Scarface and killed him, and the heat's on!"

"The—the *what*?"

"The heat's on, I said! They'll be after us in no time. *There!*" An ominous, all-too-familiar whining sound came dimly to Chip's ears. "I hear him now, Jordan's coming back. Wait a minute!"

He leaped to Phipps' body, snatched the Moeller from the dead man's hand, then sprang to the door, locked it. It was a feeble defense, he knew, but it offered him at least a moment of respite. Came the grate of Jordan's feet in the corridor outside, then a hammering on the door, and the pirate's querulous roar.

"Hey, what's going on in there? Phipps! Open up!"

And then—a miracle occurred. For when Chip deserted the control panel, he had released the telaudio key. And theoretically all communication between himself and his friends was broken. But now sounded a high, singing note in the air, a note that took on cadence, a cadence forming itself into words, words that were the excited voice of Syd Palmer!

"Chip, boy! Can you hear me? You all right! The heat is on! *That's the answer!* For God's sake, find a bulger, quick! Climb into it!"

THERE were cabinets in the room. To these Chip Warren raced, tearing at their handles with avid fingers, wrenching them open with violent disregard for whatever precious manuscripts, intricate and valuable apparatus, tumbled out to mingle in damaged heterogeneity on the floor. In the fourth cabinet he found that which he sought, a quartzofabricoid bulger.

Into this he flung himself, keeping a wary eye upon the door, about whose lock was already glowing a smoky circle of scarlet as Blacky Jordan, belatedly realizing there was something amiss, melted the lock with his Moeller. With a final *zzzp!* Chip closed the seam of his space suit, with a final twist of the hand screwed into place its transparent helmet. Thus, like some bloated and grotesque denizen of ocean depths, Moeller leveled and ready, he stood waiting to meet Blacky Jordan in their third, and this time necessarily final, encounter.

But Blacky Jordan never stepped into that room! The door never opened. What happened outside Chip Warren did not know nor could he guess, but that it was something fearful and beyond belief he could tell by the cry which in that moment ripped from the outlaw's throat.

"*Oh, Lord! Fire! I'm on fire!*"

And suddenly the clamor of his footsteps beat away from the door, down the hallway! Chip heard the big man hurl himself into the elevator, heard the spiraling whine of the lift rising. Wondering, yet cautious, he stepped to the door, eased it open. His hearing had not beguiled him. The corridor was empty and the elevator gone. Even as he stood there, dazed and uncomprehending, that eerie voice from nowhere again smote his ears. This time

the cadence resolved itself into the reverberant tones of Salvation Smith, roaring in throaty triumph.

"Lo, with Thy lightnings Thou hast destroyed them, O Lord! Chip, lad—you hear me? The hour of retribution has come! They cower like craven lice on the flesh of the sphere that hid them. Go to the control panel, boy; press the studs numbered 1 and 12. Haste, while we have them at our mercy!"

Obediently Chip sprang to the board, plunged the studs Salvation had named. As he did so, the steady hum of the hypatomic deepened. There came the ponderous *thud!* of a rocket jet exploding. Then another. Then almost at once the first again.

The floor beneath him shook, throbbed, trembled. Chip was conscious of a curious lightness, a sense of whirling giddiness that he recognized almost immediately. He had experienced the sensation once before when a spaceship in which he had been a passenger was thrown into axial revolution by the titanic tug of Jupiter. Clinging for support to whatever offered itself, he moved with difficulty to the room's vision-plates, opened the circuit that revealed the exterior of the *Aurora*, and—what he saw brought a cry to his lips. A cry in which was mingled triumph and awe and almost a certain horror-stricken, involuntary pity.

His depresison of studs 1 and 12, firing-jets at opposite poles of the *Aurora*, had spun the tiny planetoid into axial rotation. It was whirling, now, like a gigantic top in the void. And from its surface, no longer held captive by the feeble artificial gravity, were hurtling the bodies of those whom a moment before had so proudly and confidently strode the asteroid's surface!

Chip saw one sight which would haunt him forever. Blacky Jordan emerging from the surface tunnel . . . being whisked from the bosom of the *Aurora* as if by an invisible hand . . . drawn violently to his vacuum tomb. For the split second there was an expression of terrible, uncomprehending fear on the pirate's face—then there was neither face nor pirate. Just the black, inexorable depths of space, studded with the myriad planetoid shards which formed the Bog.

AFTERWARD Chip Warren said to Dr. Blaine, "I'm afraid Doctor, that if we're ever to set foot again in any civilized port, you must take us there. After the *Aurora* stopped revolving I went topside to look for the *Chickadee*. I thought we might be able to repair it. But it's gone, just like Blacky Jordan and his crew. Everything on the surface of the planetoid was whisked away."

Dr. Blaine said, "I intend to do just that, Chip. As a matter of fact, Syd is already plotting our course. But I hope that after we've landed you, that won't be the last we'll ever see of you. Alison and I owe you an undying debt of gratitude. Had it not been for you—"

"You were magnificent!" breathed the girl. And looking at her, finding with an incredulous surprise a look in her eyes which more than echoed her father's wish, Chip knew Dr. Blaine would not, indeed, easily avoid seeing more of him. For he had heard the Lorelei's call and found it sweet.

Salvation, intercepting the look that passed between them, laughed. Flushing, Chip took refuge in denial of Dr. Blaine's claim. "Thank you, sir, but I'm afraid you overestimate our part in besting Jordan. Or at least *my* part. All I did was press the plunger. I wouldn't have known to do that if you folks hadn't told me. And I *still* don't understand what caused Jordan and all of the rest of his men who were below ground to race for the surface of the asteroid."

Dr. Blaine said, "That was Sydney's idea." But Syd contradicted him peremptorily. "Nope! I'm a great one for passing the buck. Oh, I thought of the means, maybe. But it was Chip who gave me the idea."

"Me?"

"Uh-huh. When you shouted 'the heat's on!' Remember? We four had been down here cudgeling our brains for some way to get the draw on Blacky Jordan, but we overlooked a hell of an obvious trick until you mentioned *heat*. Then all of a sudden Doc Blaine and I saw the answer at the same time. Fortunately he had an omniwave unit there in his laboratory and that did the trick. See?"

"No," confessed Chip frankly. "I don't."

"Well, it's really very simple. Doc Blaine

told us the omniwave transmitted every length of radiation from 30 kilos down to 4000 Angstroms. In other words, everything from long radio waves down to visible light rays."

"So?" said Chip.

"So, dopey-puss," said Syd amiably, "of course, that includes the *infra-red* rays. Heat waves. Waves that have the power to speed up molecular velocity in bodies. Or—" He grunted satisfaction—"hot enough to create a raging fever in any human being on the asteroid who wasn't dressed in a spacesuit!"

"Well, right away I asked Doc Blaine how he'd taken care of that problem in distributing his omniwave radiation, and he said he had always used a cutout to eliminate that danger. So we just quietly removed the cutout, and turned on the omniwave full force, and—" Syd shrugged—"burnt those babies to a crisp! They didn't even know what ailed them! All they knew was that they were as hot as boiled potatoes, and wanted to get outside where they could cool off. The rest of us, dressed in bulgers, were O.K."

"And," said Chip, "when they got outside we revolved the *Aurora*, and—"

"*Finis!*" agreed Syd cheerfully, "and a good day's work, too, if you ask me. Incidentally, Chip, while we're on the subject—"

Syd was a very talkative guy. He would have undoubtedly continued this harangue for a couple more hours. But at that moment his eyes happened to intercept another glance passing between Alison Blaine and Chip Warren. It was a glance that meant things. It was a glance that meant that maybe some day in the not-too-far-distant future the Lorelei might yet lure, but not necessarily to destruction, a mariner who had flown thousands of miles across space to answer her call.

Syd coughed uncomfortably. "Say," he suggested, "Doc . . . Salvation . . . what do you say we go down to the control-turret and plot our course a little more carefully? We wouldn't want to make any mistakes, you know. This is a mighty valuable invention we're flying—"

Syd was a very talkative guy. But, thought Chip Warren, sometimes he talked good ideas. . . .





# Queen of the Blue World

By BASIL WELLS

**Blue vegetation, red insect-men, hideous green thuftars. . . . Earth was a strange sight to those first space-spanning Martians.**

*Illustrated by Morey*

**"NO** sign of the *Indra*!" shouted Rurak Dun, with an angry toss of his wet hair away from his aching forehead.

It was hot there in the tiny cabin of the wing with the rocket blasts thrumming behind them. Rurak dropped the sweat-sticky circle of his radiophone and peered down at the foul blueness of the swamp-land. A range of low hills shouldered aside the oozy floor of liquid mud, and blue jungle crept high up along their rocky slopes almost to their barren upper tips. Beyond the hills he could see where the outer limits of the coastal swamp ended and the level stretches of the Mossy Plains spread away endlessly.

Insect-men, or Yzaps, with almost human intelligence and organization inhabited Earth—or more properly Soora in the Martian tongue—and bat-like monstrosities swarmed thick above the rocky uplands between the blue swamplands and the plains of moss that stretched now before his gaze.

Rurak Dun felt the sweat bead on the tip of his nose. The thick humid air of Terra choked him and he wondered. After so many years would there be any shred of the wreckage left above the lush foliage of the jungle? After the light-helioed message that the *Indra* was about to crash on Earth there had been no other message from Prince Hudar Kel and his party.

And now, seventeen years later, another space ship had been sent to search for Prince Kel. His father, the Emperor, had died and within three days both his elder brothers succumbed to the same mysterious malady that had taken their father's life. Before the New Year a new ruler must be found . . . and Earth and Mars were again in apposition!

"Nidan," clicked the mandibles of the

hideous insect man who shared the cabin with Rurak Dun, "I see a ship-from-the-Sky."

Rurak's gray eyes narrowed in the golden flesh of his sweating face. Then he shouted and snapped on his radiophone.

"Gor!" he shouted, "Gor."

"Uh?" grunted a lazy voice in his receiver.

"I've found them," Rurak told him swiftly. "On a level hilltop in the swamp! The *Indra* seems rather battered—trees growing up through one section of her hull—but there are signs of life about her. Probably Yzaps who have built a village there. Going down to investigate."

"Nidan!" shrieked the Earthling Tis, brandishing the old metal knife the *Tekna's* cook had given him, "thuftars attacking! Many thuftars!"

Rurak dropped the mouthpiece and swung his visual scope around the horizon.

Scores of vast green thuftars were circling above and about him, their hideous green shapes, travesties of the human form, gathering for a concerted attack upon his frail wing. They wheeled easily through Earth's atmosphere, although no wings or any other evidence of how they maintained flight was visible. Their scaly bodies terminated in horny, reptilian hands and feet, and their triple-spiked ears lent the ultimate in grotesquerie to their appearance.

The thuftars' shrill whistling skirled hideously and constantly as they dove in toward the wing. Rurak tripped the guns again and again as he dove and climbed among that circling swarm of scaly harpies and many a thuftar's greenish blood sprayed from its burst body over its fellows.

Tis had climbed into the gun turret in the cabin's narrow rear but he understood

nothing of how to fire that weapon. Rurak regretted that he had not brought along one of his own comrades. Perhaps together they could have driven off the thuftars.

The wing bucked and spun in a tight circle while Rurak let his guns spray at their ultimate capacity. Thuftars fell, many of them, but scores of them remained. They were too many. Rurak dove away then, sounding for the ground. Perhaps under the trees of the hilltop beside the *Indra* he could take shelter—drive the scaly beings off.

Blue lacy fronds of the hilltop forest were almost beneath his landing gear when he felt the first impact of a diving thuftar's weight. Again and again the wing quivered as more thuftars struck and clung. The controls were frozen. Slowly the wing nosed over and sideslipped, and then the upper branches of the forest swallowed them all.

Rurak saw a network of interlacing great branches and thick vines snaking through them. A wall of blue jungle came smashing inward against the wing's frail cabin and then a prolonged splintering crash sounded as though from a great distance.

Curiously he watched himself grope feebly among the shattered debris of what had been the instrument panel for the radiophone. He laughed even as he watched. The wing was a hopeless wreck.

Tis, the Yzap native, crawled out of the shattered turret and helped Rurak to climb into the vine-latticed branches about them. He hoped that Rurak would remember to take along his rocket pistol and some shells and was pleased to see Rurak obediently follow his will. It was strange to float here impartially a few feet above his own dazed body. There was no pain, just a dull aching void far back in his brain.

He watched the figures of Rurak Dun and Tis slowly descending and somehow he was descending with them. They dropped a last few feet to the mossy soil beneath the great trees and he felt the jar jolt up to his brain. The misty something that seemed to have separated him from his body was dissolving. He could feel pain and taste the salty warmth of sweat in his mouth.

An ominous black wall of metal reared itself out of the jungle a few yards away and he sensed that here was the handiwork of some intelligent creature. There was an oval window of transparent material staring like some empty eyesocket out of the wall at him. Memory jabbed feebly at him and presently he recalled what this must be . . . The *Indra*!

VOICES were shouting something in a tongue that was familiar; whether Yzap or Rurak's own beloved Martian he could not tell. And then he saw a knot of dark shapes, red insect men, crawling toward him through the blue jungle. But it was not the sudden appearance of these creatures that made Rurak gape in wonderment. For circling to a landing above the heads of the insect men was a small golden chariot drawn by two gigantic crimson birds. And standing in the sky-chariot was the most beautiful woman Rurak Dun had ever seen. As the queer conveyance swooped gracefully to rest in the small clearing the girl stepped out and walked swiftly toward them. Her amazingly golden hair floated freely about her rounded, shapely shoulders as she approached the dumb-founded group. Rurak Dun remembered that he was still gaping rudely. He colored, and started an apology, but with upraised hand, the girl brushed it aside.

"I am Nitha Kel, daughter of Hudar Kel," she explained tersely.

Now he could see that her brief vest of golden cloth and her short skirt were made of the carefully tanned hide of some Earthly beast. Sandals of thick hide were upon her shapely feet and there was a regal unconscious poise to her whole body that stamped her as the princess that she claimed to be.

"And I," he said, forcing himself to speak, "am Rurak Dun, fifth officer of the *Tekna*, come to rescue your royal father if he yet lives."

"Father is alive," she said puzzled, "and is even now fighting off the attack of one of our renegade crew and his party of Yzaps. But why this sudden interest in our whereabouts? Is it only because our two planets are in apposition? Surely a third son of a Martian emperor is not worthy of a special expedition?"

"Your father is now our Emperor," said Rurak gravely, "if he returns to claim his throne before the New Year. And the time is drawing short. Will you take me to him at once?"

She nodded, then turned and ran back to her strange conveyance. A word of command, and the two giant birds rose gracefully into the air. They did not disappear, but hovered above Nitha Kel and Rurak Dun as they made their way on foot through the jungle.

"They are attacking the South Cliff today," Nitha told Rurak as they walked along. "Jokar Ged and his ferocious Inpo warriors are climbing ladders of lashed poles and young trees to try to take this hilltop. We will beat them back of course but many of our brave Yzaps will die."

"Why do you fight?" Rurak wanted to know. "What does Jokar Ged desire so greatly here upon the hilltop—the wrecked *Indra*?"

Nitha laughed. "He desires me," she said. "I am the only woman on Earth. My mother died soon after I was born and since then all of the six members of our crew, save Jokar Ged, have cared for me. Last year Jokar Ged tried to take me away with him but I escaped and reported his treachery to Father. There has been war between them since that hour."

"I do not wonder that Jokar Ged was in love with you," Rurak Dun said boldly. "You are lovelier than all the beautiful women of Mars."

Nitha's clear blue eyes looked coldly into Rurak's admiring gray eyes and he knew that he had offended her.

So in silence they hurried along the forest ways with Tis and the friendly insect men of the hilltop trailing along behind them, and the crimson birds circling above.

IT happened so suddenly they had no chance to seek cover. One moment they were crossing a round hilltop, surrounded by the strange, jagged blue peaks of this unbelievable world. The next, with a sound of rushing wind, one of the hideous green thuftars was in their midst. Before Rurak could draw his ray-gun and fire, he felt the creature's scaly, lizard fingers wrapped about the protective collar of his throat. The world spun crazily, then began slowly to go black before his

eyes. He was dimly aware of Nitha's voice. "Trak! Odap! Down, quickly," and the beating of pinions as the mighty birds settled to earth. Then miraculously the pressure about his throat was gone, and he shook his head to clear his sight. Blurred at first, then stronger he saw a startling scene. Nitha had mounted her chariot, and now, sharp spear poised stiffly before her, had sent her weird team into a headlong charge at the thuftar. The enraged beast tried to launch itself into the air to parry the attack, but he had waited too long. There was the sound of metal against a scaly breast, then Nitha and her bird-chariot had passed by, and the thuftar was clawing futilely at the shaft of the long spear that was buried deep within its body. With a last convulsive effort, he tore it loose, and foul green blood gushed from the jagged hole. He staggered a few steps, then fell gasping to the rocky ground. He twitched convulsively once, then lay still. Nitha again descended, and ran swiftly to Rurak. He raised himself on one knee and elbow, still breathing gaspingly. The insect men crowded about him with queer clacking noises. He staggered weakly to his feet.

"I'm—I'm all right," he gasped. "Let's get on before more of them come." He smiled twistedly. "And thanks for the favor. I guess I wasn't much help."

Nitha waved aside his thanks perfunctorily, and once again the little party moved forward.

They came abruptly to the brink of a sheer cliff that dropped away perhaps thirty feet to a rock-strewn brushy slope. Down there a burly golden man, his massive chest and arms shaggy with a tangled mat of reddish hair, led a hideous horde of Yzaps from the distant Mossy Plains on to the attack.

Ladders, a dozen or more of them constructed of massive limbs of wood and stout saplings for uprights, leaned against the cliff almost at its top. Sprawling heaps of Yzaps, their glistening black exoskeletons spattered with their own yellowish blood, attested to the failure of the preceding assaults.

But this time the Yzaps carried heavy shields of sticks two or three layers in thickness before them as they advanced. Spears drove up from below and other

spears smashed down into the attackers' crude shields without doing any apparent damage.

Rurak shot a quick glance along the cliff-top on either hand and saw that a thin line of fierce looking Yzap warriors, with here and there a golden Martian to direct their defense, held firm. None of the Martians, however, was armed with anything save crude spears and crossbows such as Martian boys have constructed since time immemorable.

Then the insect men of Jokar Ged swept up to the ladders and swiftly mounted toward the hilltop above.

CROSSBOW bolts and spears could not drive back that swarming horde. The defenders tried with poles to fend off the ladders and their loads of bloodthirsty Yzaps but spears from below soon put an end to their endeavor. Then they hurled great rocks down upon the enemy, sweeping many of them off but never for an instant halting that dogged advance.

Rurak Dun saw that the tide was turning against the defenders of the hilltop even as he slipped his rocket pistol over the rim of the cliff and started picking off the attackers one by one. Fear of the explosion as much as the sudden death that struck among them made the Plains' Yzaps falter and then come to a halt.

"Only a popgun!" Jokar Ged was bellying as he dashed among his startled followers. "Will you be driven back by a little stick that spits lead? Come along, up the ladder with you."

His heavy fists were lashing out, trying to beat courage into the insect men. Rurak shot at him again and again but the luck of Droog must have protected his evil carcass from death. All around him the Yzaps were falling dead with bullets in their heads.

The weapons of the other defenders now increased their fire and shortly the demoralized ranks of the renegade Martian's party were straggling away among the brushy cover that the lower slopes afforded. For the time there would be respite from battle.

"A Martian!" a hearty voice boomed beside Rurak Dun and he spun about to face a grag-bearded giant of a man, "a Martian come to rescue us at an opportune mo-

ment. Jokar Ged grows more cunning with every fresh attack and soon this little hilltop will fall before his superior forces.

"But tell me, stranger," he went on, "how you came here. Did you come to find where my ship crashed, or are you merely carrying out a routine exploration of this planet? What has happened on Mars?"

"You are Prince Hudar Kel?" inquired Rurak.

"Yes," nodded the bearded giant.

"Then I have news for you, my Emperor," Rurak told him, "that will perhaps not be pleasant. Your father, the Emperor, and your two brothers have all died. We have come to find you and take you back to Mars before the New Year."

The bearded giant's hard fingers sunk convulsively into Rurak's shoulder and he said nothing for a time. Then his tall body stiffened proudly and he smiled gravely down at the young Martian.

"I am ready to return and assume my duties," he said simply.

"TWO days we have been floating down this stinking river," squat Elko Sohni groaned as he wielded his crude native paddle. "Two days with the blistering hot rain scalding our poor backs and the stench of mouldering purple vegetation in our nostrils. Hurry, you tell me, that we may reach the *Tekna* before she blasts off again for Mars.

"If you ask me we'd better have stayed with the old *Indra* and waited for them to find us. For seventeen long years, figuring by the shorter year of this soggy hell of a planet, we lived there on that hilltop. There was no danger from the swampland monsters and only the green-scaled thuftars could get near us. And now you take me, a warped wreck of an old man, and plunge into the thick of this unknown hell."

Rurak grinned crookedly through lips that insect-bites had swollen grotesquely. Ahead of him the glistening form of *Tis* dipped his paddle rhythmically into the liquid scum that flooded the sluggish river. *Tis* was at home here in the watery blue marshes and liquid mud flats of the continent's eastern shore.

Somewhere ahead the huge bulk of the

*Tekna* wallowed atop a marshy island not far from one of the myriad crystalline growths that dotted this three-tailed continent's marshy places. Seeking always the marshy seaboards or inland rivers and lakes these colonies of linked, silicon-based, crystalline cells—sometimes called the "cities" of Earth by imaginative astronomers—spread over miles of area and soared in fantastic towers and spires hundreds of feet into the thick moist air of Earth's heavens.

And toward that crystal signboard beside the Great Sea they were driving their rude dugout to carry the glad news that the new Emperor was found.

Two days had they waited for another flying wing to contact the hilltop and on the second night old Elko Sohm, Tis, and Rurak had slipped away in the darkness and headed eastward. Past native villages of thatch and mud floating upon living rafts of vegetation they raced and through dense water-lanes where the blue and purple of foliage shut off the murky light of the swollen sun. . . .

"Elko Sohm! Rurak Dun!" the cry sounded faintly from the foggy depths of the river behind them.

Tis guided the clumsy boat into the arched cave of a swamp tree's roots and picked up his spear. Elko Sohm grunted as he stripped the oiled leather case from about his sturdy crossbow.

"The voice of a woman," he announced resignedly. "Nitha has for some reason trailed us this far."

"Elko!" the voice called again and now they could see another smaller dugout, stolen perhaps from the same Yzap village where they had found theirs, with but two passengers aboard.

"Here," announced Elko Sohm sadly, "under this tree's roots with water dripping from the moss down along my raw-fleshed back and the swamp vermin chewing away at the little hair left upon my skull."

The tiny craft followed their own ragged trail through the bluish broken scum upon the river and shortly the two dugouts were warped side by side. Nitha was there, well smeared with the sticky blue gum of a swamp tree against the onslaught of insects and with her golden hair bound tight within an ugly skin cap,

and with her was an Yzap from the village, called Thod.

Nitha laughed as she saw the swollen features of the two Martians and handed a leaf-wrapped gob of the sticky blue gum that she had smeared upon her own skin.

"Not very attractive," she admitted, "but very effective."

"AND now," Rurak demanded, "why did you follow us? This journey is dangerous enough without a woman trailing along."

"Ill bred young man isn't he?" asked Nitha of Elko Sohm. "However I suppose I might as well tell *you* all about it, Elko. He can listen in if he really wants to know.

"The same night you left," she went on, "Jokar Ged and his Yzaps came in the darkness and attacked the village. All who could escape came inside the *Indra's* metal shell. They built fires against the hull hoping to drive us out but the insulation prevented any great passage of heat. But there were few provisions stored there and practically no water.

"With early morning I slipped out through an escape lock with Thod as my guide and at a safe distance showed myself to the horde of Jokar Ged. As I had known he would, he sent all his forces after me—it was for me that he stormed the hilltop—and my people were free to emerge from the *Indra* again.

"I knew that you had headed for the coast to bring help and so Thod and I picked up your trail. Only now have we come up with you."

"Jokar Ged?" demanded Rurak.

"Close behind," the girl answered, "with ten dugouts loaded with his insect warriors."

"Then shove off!" ordered Rurak. "We will bring up the rear and stand them off as best we can."

Even as he spoke and the two heavy boats slid away from the sheltering tree-roots a shout of hideous triumph sounded from further upstream as a flotilla of hollowed-out logs manned by the clicking, whistling Yzaps of Jokar Ged swept into view. The fugitives bent to their paddles then and slowly the gap between ceased to narrow.

Several times Rurak lifted his rocket

pistol and sent a bullet crashing through a savage Yzap's head. Every time the insect men hurled a volley of spears in return that always fell woefully short. But soon Jokar Ged saw that most of his men were weaponless, save for their stone knives and short knotted clubs, and he forbade them to waste any more spears uselessly.

"Floating village," clicked Tis and they swept around an abrupt wedge of jungle growth and swung back toward the left into a widening of the river.

"Big one," grunted Elko Sohm. "Twenty-odd huts and a central dome. Better hug the shore. Bad medicine, these swamp Yzaps."

"Too late," Tis told them. "Already warriors in round boats coming to attack."

A dozen bowl-shaped craft of reeds daubed with some sticky waterproof substance were shoving off from the U shaped island of buoyant, linked water plants. Before the conical low domes of slime-smeared reeds and branches there swarmed the mates and young of the hideous Yzaps, urging their warriors on to the attack of these two hapless dugouts from further upstream.

The insect men paddled their clumsy-seeming boats swiftly across the path of the Martians and their two loyal Yzaps and then started to encircle them. They closed in.

The insect men swung up their spears ready to hurl them into the bodies of their five victims and in that instant two things happened that saved the Martians from death beneath those bristling shafts.

From far up the river a piercing challenge of hatred and savage challenge rolled up as the Yzaps of the renegade Martian swung into view, and beneath the dugouts of the trapped ones a vast saurian bulk, dulled-yellow-scaled and vast, heaved upward.

**R**URAK felt the hollow log spill over and in that instant caught a glimpse of the other boat in a like predicament. The bowl-boats of the Swamp Dwellers were scattered, racing madly away from the great shape emerging from the muddy thickness of the river. Then the foul scum of the water's surface closed over his head and he was fighting madly to reach the surface again.

A long snaky neck, strangely pink and innocent of bony plates or scales, had sprouted from the saurian thing's vague bulk and vast ridged jaws were gaping wide just above one of the fleeing boats as Rurak's head broke through to the surface. The Yzaps whistled in wild terror and made as though to leap over the side but that enormous maw engulfed them and they disappeared from view. Only a few shreds of the bowl-boat dropped from the corners of the *thing's* mouth.

Then it was gone.

The ten dugouts of Jokar Ged swept down upon the demoralized Swamp Dwellers and soon Yzap fought Yzap in hand-to-hand combat.

"Nidan!" called Tis from nearby.

Now Rurak could see four more heads in the muddy stream about him. They were all safe then! Tis was swimming toward the downstream side of the artificial floating island of the Yzaps.

"We hide here until night," Tis told them all as they gathered about him swimming. "No place to go ashore. Only swamp. We steal a boat tonight. Go on down river in it."

"Yzaps on the island!" gasped Elko Sohm, looking like some befouled bladder-doll of the primitive Martian tribes.

"They watch the battle," Tis clicked.

Up to the low bank of the floating island they swam and then Tis and Thod started to slash an opening into the cheesy structure of the watery growth. For perhaps three feet they slashed with their knives and then broke through into a low, moist tunnel.

"*Trak's* burrow," Tis explained. "The floating islands and low rises of mud are honeycombed with them."

**T**IS and Thod cleared out the soggy passages that underlay the floating island and found a way that led to the upstream side. Five of the many-legged *traks* they encountered and killed with the thrust of a shortened spear or a skillfully wielded knife, shoving the gruesome lizard carcasses into the gaping watery pits that opened along the low tunnels they traversed.

Rurak left Elko to guard Nitha and crept on hands and knees after the two Yzaps. He came up with them just as they



had pierced an eyehole through the living wall of the island's upper side.

"Jokar Ged is being beaten!" Tis clicked. "More of the Swamp Dwellers are coming from the island and from the swamps. There are many of them. They kill the Yzaps of Jokar Ged with spears and fishing harpoons.

"Jokar Ged is wounded! Blood, red blood, comes from his body! His boats are turning. . . . They paddle away up the river. Spears thrown by the Swamp People strike among them. . . . A boat overturns. . . ."

"Let me see, Tis," ordered Rurak.

A glimpse of the fleeing knot of dugouts, five of them now, with the circling score or more bowl-boats closing in, was all that Rurak could see before the wedge-shaped arm of jungle just upstream blotted out vision. He saw Jokar Ged sagging weakly in one of the fleeing boats, the spear that had wounded him yet hanging in the wound.

Then he saw the overturned dugout drifting toward the island. He turned to the Earthmen.

"Could one of you swim out there and steer that boat around to the lower side of the island?" he demanded.

"Yes, Nidan," clicked Thod and with a slash of his crude stone knife he made an opening and was gone.

Rurak waited until he saw the derelict craft shift its drifting course and move away downriver and then he led the way back to the others. If they could sink the boat or conceal it under the bulk of the island until darkness came. . . .

"A CLOSE shave that," Elko Sohm growled as he paddled the boat along a salty watercourse parallel with the Great Sea, "if the Yzaps had come back before Thod reached us and we hid the boat we would all be dead. I'm thinking yet we should have remained on the hill-top. A foolhardy undertaking this."

"All that happened a week ago," Nitha laughed up into Elko's stubby, filthy, moon of a face, "and still you're grumbling. We got away didn't we?"

"Almost there," Rurak said to Elko. "Around the second loop ahead of us lies the edge of the crystalline horde near

which we landed. Before long we will be with our friends and then back to Mars. Home again, Elko!"

Abruptly the ominous hushed sounds of the swamplands, the hum of insects and the raucous cries of the flying lizards among the treetops, was smashed across by a vast explosion. It was a continuous explosion that swelled louder as it continued, a rapid series of controlled blasts.

"The *Tekna*!" cried Rurak in despair, "blasting off for Mars!"

A long gleaming pencil of metal soared on a long slant into the sky overhead; the flame of her rocket jets boomed a thunderous farewell, and then the *Tekna* was gone.

Half-heartedly the five passengers of the little dugout took up their makeshift paddles and held to their course. At least there would be the plastic dome they had erected beside the *Tekna* to prevent the overcrowding of the ship and perhaps there would be a stock of provisions and weapons left behind for Rurak if he should ever find his way back to the coast.

The dome was still standing although blackened somewhat by the blast of the takeoff.

Into the dome the Martians hurried to find it well stocked with all sorts of provisions and equipment. There was a message left there too in a heavy transparent case bolted to one of the uprights supporting the dome.

"Listen to this, Nitha!" cried Rurak. "They made contact with your father's crew after all. The time was too near for them to wait for us—the New Year you know—so they blasted off for Mars with your father. And next year, or the year after, another expedition will come to Earth. Until then. . . ."

"Yes" asked Nitha, smiling, "until then?"

Rurak felt the warmth of her woman's body beside him as he looked around the snug little dome. Tis and Thod were clicking softly together near the entrance and Elko Sohm was squinting along the sights of an automatic rocket rifle.

"Two more years in this blue hell," he groaned hopelessly. "An old man like me abandoned here on this sponge of a world!"

# MAN OF THE STARS

By SAM MOSKOWITZ

**A dream made the Captain master of space. From Earth to far-flung Alpha Centauri the Universe acclaimed him. But when his dream collapsed, the god of the stars became a mortal—naked and afraid!**

*Illustrated by Lynch*

**T**HOUSANDS of men have spun a trail of daring adventure and pioneering in the spaceways. There are statues in virtually every park on the planet dedicated to their truly magnificent achievements. Statues of rugged men, with set chins and purposeful eyes. Pioneers who blasted open the greatest frontier of them all, so you cannot blame us if doggedly we persist in revering their magic names; to honor their memories.

Aye, their adventures were glorious. It was said that they were men of iron, with muscles of flexible steel and a scarcity of emotion that inured them to the worst the cosmos could offer. Men who could stand the pounding, the rigors of nature at her worst—and who left their emotions home—where they belonged. *All except one!*

I met him under conditions under which I hope I shall never meet a man again. The ship was a brother to madness the day he came aboard. Quarantined and tightly sealed. For all Earth knew, and feared the fact that madness lurked aboard our vessel. Madness in the form of that innocent sounding scourge which men have named—Space Sickness.

Space Sickness. The very utterance of its name is sufficient to make strong men cringe in abject fear, to make an entire crew drop to their knees in religious fervor.

Those rays. Rays which men know as Cosmic Rays. They were the cause. Penetrating even a foot of lead, bathing every atom of a man's soul in its never ceasing mysterious rays.

And somewhere's in a man's body, dormant bacteria were aroused into activity by their proddings, and swarmed to attack—the brain! The brain! That was the only part of a man's structure which was attacked, and the disease rarely killed—oh

so rarely, but a thousand new insane asylums, overflowing with tens of thousands of new victims bore mute testimony to its effectiveness!

Men have survived the disease, but always after there was a slowness of mind and body about them, that told you, more eloquently than words that key centers in their brains had burned out!

And just as quickly as it would strike, it would disappear—as though it worked in infinite cycles.

Our brig was full, packed with a dozen dull eyed morons and gibbering maniacs. Men who had survived the disease—but would never know it.

It was under those conditions that I first saw the Captain!

Our former commander raved incoherently in the brig, and our quarantine had not been lifted for twenty-four days when the space lock was commanded to be swung open and through its roundness paced three bizarre figures that might have been some past writer's version of the men from Mars.

From head to foot they were cloaked in protective masses of armor and lead—a gas mask on their face, and they walked with the slow, cautious step of men who are afraid.

And then, behind them, came the Captain! *Unprotected except for a uniform designating his rank and the skin he was born with!* Unafraid, unhesitatingly he strode into the atmosphere that meant for him the fearful uncertainty of awful madness.

And it wasn't just the fact that there were still men on the face of the Earth who were not afraid to unhesitatingly walk into the face of insanity. It was that this man resembled anything but that fearless breed.

He stood a little more than five foot ten.



*A gasp rent from his lungs at every step, as the liquid hell swirled and eddied about him in steaming, tormenting heat,*

He had smooth, black hair and a handsome, soft featured face. He looked soft. Perhaps in a city gymnasium he might have passed as being in fair condition, but among hardened space-rats he was little more than a red-cheeked, cherubic babe.

His skin was naturally a little dark, a beautiful tan color. And his chin seemed weak—weak in the sense that it was the good natured, nice boy type of chin.

Perhaps he was twenty-two, his age was hard to determine. His voice was heavy and emotional—he would have made a fine orator. And he talked in the half-cultured, half-down-to-earth way in which men who have had to acquire their culture by themselves sometimes talk.

And just one other thing. There was a haunting wistfulness, an air of detached embarrassment that made you feel just a little sorry for him, though you didn't particularly know why.

By the eleven moons of Jupiter, what? What in all creation could have prompted this man, this young creature that must have had everything in the world to live for, who could have carved a name for himself in any of a thousand diverse occupations—what had prompted him to head aboard a hell ship stamped with the stigma of madness, trailed by the spectre of death which followed every space vessel?

And those others. Those others who had come with him protected by every method known to science. They did not even give him time to change his mind. Did not fling back as much as a glance of pity for a martyr in a day and age when the breed seemed virtually extinct. They hustled the mentally broken remnants of the crew who had succumbed to Space Sickness from the brig into an air-tight container waiting outside, and then left to deposit them in a convenient insane asylum.

And so they left him. Left the new Captain to the uncertainty of his future existence. I saw them hand him papers, papers which I knew well and recognized. Papers commanding the exploration of Saturn. Saturn, in whose rings a dozen expeditions had perished. Saturn the ultimate destiny of men doomed to madness.

**T**HE first time the Captain addressed us remains vivid in my mind. He lined up the crew and stood a moment, self-

consciously, slightly abashed at the sullen and taciturn attitude of the entire group.

"Men," he began in a loud voice.

The crew was silent.

"This is the first time I've ever been placed over a large group of men. I've been fortunate in obtaining this job, and I'm going to do my darnedest to make good. Many of you men here know a lot more about space and conditions outside than I do, but. . ."

Simultaneously shouts resounded in the closed confines of the ship. Cutting off the Captain's words abruptly.

All eyes stared with horror. Stared at Big Murphy!

Big Murphy. Mightiest of all space men. Terror of the ranks. Powerful giant that had pounded dozens of men into helpless pulp. He had straightened to his full height, and from his brow. . . God! *From his brow dripped glistening, yellow beads of sweat!* Yellow beads of madness. Big Murphy had been struck by Space Sickness!

His eyes. Oh, how can I describe the terror of them. The gleaming insanity that directed itself toward the puzzled, youthful form of our new Captain.

And that mighty, terrible destructive machine that was Murphy broke ranks and strode toward the Captain.

And we. We the crew. We stood by. Paralyzed with fright. Helpless, and not yet quite callous enough to dare to touch a man afflicted by the dread ravages of Space-Sickness.

As we stared Big Murphy hit the Captain, a short, terrific blow with one caloused hand.

The youngster reeled dizzily against the inside hull of the ship. If ever I saw shocked surprise in a man's face it was portrayed on his.

Murphy was a rock-solid two hundred pounder. Veteran of a dozen space voyages. The new Captain, who, up to now, had not been granted a chance to give his name could hardly have weighed more than one hundred and eighty pounds—one hundred and eighty pounds of easy living.

Still, he had more guts than we gave him credit for. He came off the wall with his fists clenched, and the attitude of a man who knows he's going to lose, but re-

fuses to be totally disgraced in doing it.

That was just what Murphy wanted. I've seen Big Murphy fight a twenty-minute battle with a Venusian Heleguite—monstrous six limbed, half-reptilian creatures, and emerge the bloody victor. I've seen him win so many fights that the idea of his losing never entered my mind. The entire question when a man fought Murphy was: How long could he last? How long could the awful smashes of those killer fists be endured? And what of that demonic brightness that glistened in his eyes?

ORDINARY men, knowing Murphy's reputation; knowing the horror of Space Sickness, would have closed their eyes as he moved in for the slaughter. But space-rats are not ordinary men. They know the meaning of no emotions other than fear and hatred. Who blink in puzzlement at the mention of such abstract things as pity—or love!

So they fairly licked their lips in anticipation.

With one powerful back hand swipe Murphy swept away the Captain's defense. With the other he planted a terrible blow on the chin of the newcomer.

The Captain's head snapped back at the impact. His knees wobbled; his hands rose feebly to ward off further punishment.

Murphy's lips curled cruelly. He smashed a blow right through the Captain's upheld arms. It landed with a sickening thud.

What held the man up I don't know. His features mirrored excruciating pain—and suddenly, something else—anger! Anger was spreading over his cheeks like an expanding gas balloon. An anger of such feverish intensity that it seemed it would consume him where he stood.

And then, with suicidal impatience, the Captain plunged toward Murphy, red rage expressed in every line of his body. Suddenly those arms seemed a little less soft; the legs soundly competent.

Astonishment reflected in Murphy's face, and then joy. The joy of a man who finds pleasure in beating his fellows to helpless pulp; who hopes a man will not fall just yet, not until he has hit him a few more times.

Thud! Thud! Murphy pounded left

and right into the Captain's body. But it didn't stop him! He pushed on! Crash! a terrible right hand punch delivered with all of Murphy's strength exploded on the jaw. The Captain went down, but just for the tiniest fraction of an instant. Then he was on his feet again. And as though he had never been hit rushed toward Murphy.

There was something more than disdain in the faces of the watching men. There was disgust. The disgust strong men reserve for someone who is unwilling to concede unquestionable superiority.

But disgust soon turned to amazement. The Captain had connected with his first two punches. A glancing right to Murphy's cheek, and then a pounding left to the mid-section.

Murphy threw his entire weight behind a bone-crushing wallop calculated to end the fight then and there.

Clumsily the Captain avoided it, and sent three sharp lefts ringing off Murphy's ear in return.

Murphy was murderous with rage. He was swinging like a mad man. Right, left, right, left—but hit mostly empty air. By accident, by clumsy footwork, by pure luck the Captain avoided the punches. Then he was in again, with a vivid tattoo upon Murphy's mid-section.

Minutes passed, and incredulity was mirrored upon every face present. The previous record any man, up to now, had held against Murphy was two minutes. More than three minutes had passed, and still the fight raged with murderous intensity.

Where the Captain drew his incredible vitality from no one knew. Certainly there hadn't been a line in his entire bearing to suggest endurance and grit.

A dozen times Murphy connected with resounding wallops that should have abruptly culminated the affair—only they didn't.

Blood streamed from the Captain's nose and eye. Half the top of his uniform was torn away, and the lower half was dyed crimson.

But again and again he attacked. Driving himself with unquestionable courage into volley after volley of Murphy's blows.

Somehow the smashing strength that had laid a hundred men silent before, seemed insufficient to cope with the "softy" who was our Captain.

Undoubtedly it was a matter of endurance. Simply a question of time before the supreme effort of the Captain would bend and collapse before the never-ceasing storm of Murphy's blows. For though the spirit is willing the flesh is often too weak. Now we began to understand how he had achieved rank of Captain, eliminating thousands of capable men. There was an unshakable purpose of mind, an insane strength that could be called upon to meet and conquer obstacles. The spirit of survival was unbelievably strong.

It was a question of endurance all right. Just when it seemed that Murphy had quieted the Captain, and that the next punch would dispose of him, new energy seemed to flood into the Captain's arms and legs and he dived headlong into Murphy. Pounding. Smashing.

And then one of them gave—but it wasn't the Captain! Murphy's mighty lungs were fairly screeching for air. His brutal arms rose and fell slowly, with failing strength.

And as Murphy grew weaker the Captain seemed to get stronger. His face was on the verge of tears from the strain of the effort he was making. His continuous punching defied every law of sensible nature.

One half hour after the battle had begun Murphy was reeling drunkenly from wall to wall, with an insane upstart pounding away with killing, untiring ferocity.

It is not a beautiful sight to see a great champion go down to defeat before an obviously inferior man. Even when he is definitely in the wrong. And despite his previous cruelty, and present madness, I could not help feeling a little sorry for Murphy. It's no disgrace to be beaten by a bigger man, but to be beaten by a smaller man, even when that "smaller" man weighs one hundred and eighty pounds definitely is a disgrace.

Twice within the next few seconds Murphy desperately tried to save his slipping prestige with all-out, do or die right hand swings. Both landed! And neither stopped the Captain! Only when Murphy had fallen three times, and three times tottered to his feet did the Captain let up his attack.

The Captain stopped hitting Murphy as he started to fall a fourth time.

Mercy was something the men remembered reading about in books, but could not recollect having viewed—until now. Particularly mercy to a crazed potential killer. And they regarded him as crazy when he helped Murphy over to, and set him down in his own seat.

"Quick," he gasped at one of the men. "Get some water."

The man obeyed!

Somewhere, during the fiasco, Murphy's immense vitality had survived the crisis of Space Sickness. But he never was quite the same.

**B**UT this unexpected victory did not gain for the Captain the respect it should have commanded. They did not regard him as a hero merely because he had survived a situation of whose catastrophic nature he was totally ignorant. Men like him they suspected of being fools, not heroes.

And besides, his talk was too nice. He seemed ignorant of good, honest profanity. And the day after the battle pursued his duties, to all appearances as incompetent as we had expected.

Luck was with us and Space Sickness did not show itself again. It had disappeared, as enigmatically as it had come.

If it were not for the fact that the journey had begun, any one of a dozen men would have challenged the Captain to battle. One simply couldn't believe that he was capable of beating a man like Murphy.

Somehow things progressed all right. The men took orders grumpily, and chafed at the ignorance often displayed by the Captain, but worked in harmony once the voyage had begun.

Now I am not a big man. I've acted more as the Captain's menial servant than anything else. There are some small men who seem capable of enduring anything a big man can—and more—and who are accepted, despite the good-natured "Shorties," as equals. I did not consider myself in that class.

Still, I felt infinitely superior to the Captain!

There was more age in his eyes than his face divulged. There was a haunting, drifting sadness about them as he gazed out of the ports into the blackness of space.



Stared at the knifing rays of light that were stars far distant, and moped in ill-disguised homesickness. There was a sort of loneliness, an ever present peniveness, that, as I said before, made you feel just a little sorry for him and a bit more inclined to put up with his shortcomings.

"Shorty," he said to me one day. "This is a devil of a life. Cut off here in space, away from everything, throwing away months, years of your life."

I stared at him as one stares at a mad man. "What do you mean, throwing away years of one's life?" I demanded.

There was a penetrating understanding about him—the gift of looking into another's mind and divining just how you felt. An incredible sensitivity that took the form of anger, instead of despair when hurt. Perhaps that was what lifted him above the common horde—pushed him into momentary glimpses of greatness.

"Shorty," he answered. "I'm afraid you don't understand me. Yes, this life is thrilling, it is adventurous, and I can understand how it could get into a man's blood and drive the thought of any other life out forever.

"You, and this, are part of the greatest achievement of mankind to date. You are fortunate, Shorty. I wish I could be like you. But I was born different. For me, there is no finer life than a home and a wife of my own. A fireplace to sit before when the day's work is done. A companion to walk down life's road with. Children to watch, to mold, to love.

"I know you think I'm crazy, Shorty. To you, a woman is some space-port girl, with whom you can carouse a night and then forget. To me," and his eyes were sad and wistful. "To me, a woman is something fine, something beautiful, to treasure, to understand, to love.

"Space flying is your entire life. Everything that counts at all. For me, it is just a job. A job that I can endure just as long as some girl is proud of me because of it. A means to an end. And just as long as I have my dream, that long, because of it, shall I work with everything in me to be successful. But should that dream be shattered to bits there would be no more meaning to my life. No reason why I should go on in this type of work—and then—. . ."

Then I knew! Here was a man in love. A man forced beyond his depth by the power of love. That defeat of Murphy could never have occurred under ordinary circumstances. It was just that it was Murphy or his dreams—and he would die for his dream!

**D**AY by day Saturn, the objective of our voyage, grew larger in the Visascreen.

And the Captain chafed impatiently, his high-strung nervous system enduring the tortures of the damned in this seemingly endless confinement.

All his energy was directed to arranging, in minute detail, the operations that would take place upon Saturn.

Space suits were gone over and reconditioned. The few available maps of Saturn were cheeked painstakingly for the best part of the world to land upon. And an air of general excitement seemed to fill the air as Saturn expanded.

The Captain was at the mike shouting orders. The deflector rays, inactive since emergence from the asteroid zone went up, pinkishly comforting.

Then the ship nosed down, down through the ceaseless stream of tiny rocks that made up the great rings of Saturn. The Captain watched the screen indicators with ill-concealed concern.

Every time a particularly large sky-rock smacked into us the impact would register, often a fraction below the red danger line.

No one had ever penetrated the great rings of Saturn. A few intrepid explorers had mapped the world from a distance of millions of miles. A half a dozen expeditionary parties had perished in its rings.

The moving rocks outside rained down upon the screen like wind-driven hail. Pounding with increasing ferocity, attempting to destroy this impudent invader.

And more than once the entire ship shuddered from stem to stern as even the deflecting rays failed to provide sufficient cushion for the rocks. At such times only the thick hull of the ship stood between us and death, and hardened though we were, involuntary shivers rippled up and down our spines.

The Captain's features were taut. He stared ahead just as an emotional actor vicariously living the same scene might

have, but here there was more than bluff—more than play acting—for I knew that his spirit was unconquerable—while he had his dream!

And then we were through the rings!

Every few miles we fell, we ejected a violent blast through the rockets to break our fall.

We slipped into the atmosphere—thick and hot as boiling soup. The ports misted over, and the fog-piercing infra-red-ray lamps were directed through them to facilitate vision.

All we could hear was the continuous slushing of the steamy atmosphere dripping off the hull of our ship.

The infra red ray operator peered intently ahead, relaying directions back to the pilot.

And the Captain stood by. Fists clenching and unclenching.

The altimeter clanged out at every hundred feet, as the meters slipped stiffly down the dials.

At five hundred feet the Captain gave the order for heavy blasting of the forward rockets.

There was a deafening roar, and the ship lurched violently. All but the pilot were sent spinning to the floor.

Some of the men cursed. Cursed the Captain's inexperience. But he pretended not to hear.

Then the ship hit! And it seemed that we were overwhelmed by a torrent of noise. And even after it hit it settled, foot by foot, inch by inch into the hot, porous soil.

The Captain called the men to attention. They lined up before him in the pilot room.

"I want several men to take a small ship and scout around the immediate territory," he asked.

There was no response.

"Any volunteers?"

Silence.

"What's the matter?"

"That's *your* job," someone rasped.

The Captain turned to me, puzzled.

"The Captain, being the most capable man in the expedition, always assigns himself to the more dangerous tasks," I imparted. "It is the accepted code of the spaceways."

"All right!" he snapped. "I'll do it. But

I don't know how to run the ship."

No one volunteered. I felt sorry for him.

"I know how to handle the ship, Sir," I said, cursing myself every word of the way.

He stared at me a moment as though he saw me for the first time.

"All right, Shorty," he acknowledged softly. "It's you and me."

Blood pounded like hell-driven vitriol in my brain as I seated myself at the controls of one of the auxiliary rocket ships. I knew only too well that this job was one for a man with ten times my experience and fortitude—but someone had to look out for the Captain.

MY hand shook as I pulled the control lever. I muttered a soundless prayer as the rockets behind me blasted and the little ship shot away from its parent at a tangent. Shot into a boiling-hot mist of unknown gases, with visibility zero.

The Captain wore a strained expression as he clumsily manipulated a small infra-red-ray camera through one of the ports. He seemed pale and uncertain, lost at this unfamiliar work. Right now, I could imagine the thoughts of home and fireside were reaching up for him in drowning waves of nostalgia.

But I didn't have much time to think. Suddenly the little ship lurched violently. It spun round and round like a top. Desperately I worked at the controls. Trying to hold them into place by the exertion of every iota of strength I possessed. Vicious, powerful currents in the almost liquid air tossed us about like a chip on a stormy sea.

The altimeter jumped insanely up and down. Two thousand feet. Zoom. Five hundred feet. One thousand feet. Zoom. One hundred. And somehow I would pull the ship out of it. Sweat pouring over me like a deluge of water.

The Captain was doing what he could. Every time the nose dipped he threw himself down at the back of the ship to balance the weight. When the control stick stuck, he helped me pull it with all his strength.

The altimeter was plunging again, one thousand. Seven hundred. Five hundred.

Two hundred. The Captain leaped to the controls, thrusting me out of the way. He grabbed the stick and bracing his feet against the control board, pulled. The muscles of his neck popped from the effort. Back, back he pulled the stick. The nose of the ship began to edge up. It was a battle between man and the elements.

Magnificently the Captain held out. Incredible dogged strength that refused to give one single inch. For a moment I almost dared to hope. Then the control stick snapped!

Like a man catapulted from the wrong end of a spring board the Captain hurtled across the interior of the ship and hit the far wall with a sickening dull thud.

The little ship was screaming down. Down, down, down. I grabbed the seat and prayed.

It seemed an avalanche caved in on us. Rolling waves of noise that poured endlessly across my brain. Then pain, excruciating pain.

Somehow I maintained enough calmness to pull the air helmet over my face. My body was one mass of stabbing pains.

The ship lay almost in pieces about us. I tried to rise to my feet and almost died there and then from the awful bolts of fire that seared to my brain. Both my legs were broken!

The red, soup air poured through the ship, obscuring all in reddish haze.

The Captain moved! At first I thought it was the pain. Then I could only stare in paralyzing amazement. The Captain was moving. Living! Breathing this hell-spawned atmosphere and living! No, it couldn't be. No one could breathe in this liquid fire and live. No one! No one!

He rose to his feet. How can I describe it? The terrible, infinite agony on his face. The hideous, horrible, gasping of his lungs. God!

He stumbled toward me. Tears of pain rolling down his cheeks. His legs sagging beneath the exacting gravity of enormous Saturn.\*

\*Saturn, despite its many times greater surface area, exerts a gravitational pull, roughly a little less than one and one-half times that of earth. This because the greater part of its bulk is made up of gases and liquids of comparatively low density. A two hundred pound man would have to carry anywhere from seventy to ninety extra pounds.

The telescopes show there is much shifting of the surface and an atmosphere in constant motion on Saturn. This would indicate powerful storms.

In a world of such enormous gas volume, it is con-

I couldn't look at him. His face was a cooked red color from the heat of the air. His eyes were pools of water. His hair steamed on his head.

Then he tripped across me! He looked, and his hands reached down.

"Leave me!" I cried. "Save yourself. My legs are broken."

Have you ever seen pity cross the eyes of a cripple for a man who has sprained his ankle? Would you know what it meant to give your last drop of water to a dying man on a desert, when it might save your own life? Could you understand how a man seated in the electric chair could feel sorry for the executioner who had burnt his fingers?

Then you can imagine how I felt when I saw concern cross that tortured, steaming face. Concern for me!

There was a kindness behind that pain. The kindness that I had seen behind his wistfulness before. A great heart that could not hold a grudge.

He grasped me about the waist. Heaved! The muscles of his arms split his sleeves at the strain of lifting a weight under the crushing gravitational pull of Saturn, half again that of earth.

"Get a helmet!" I begged him. "God! Get a helmet!" He didn't hear me. Or if he did, thought it was but delirious ravings.

He hoisted me to his shoulder, his entire body sagging six inches. Then he took a step. And at each step the joints of his knees gave and dropped within inches of the ground. Somehow he staggered on.

Some day in hell a man will duplicate that nightmarish trip.

A gasp rent from his lungs at every step. His mouth opened and closed like a grief-stricken man. And liquid hell burnt about him. Swirled and eddied in tormenting, steaming heat. Burnt into his skin, into his mouth, into his eyes. How could a man walk and breathe and live in air like that?

Then I saw the ground! Live, turgid lava! I saw the soles of his shoes flame at every step, watched his uniform burn methodically from him.

ceivable that there would be enough of the essential oxygen to support life for a short while in an emergency.

The very quantities of gas, the shifting surface, would lend credence to the theory that Saturn is still in semi-molten state.

And his eyes wept pools of water. But this time I knew they were tears. The man didn't know where he was going; he simply moved on, on and on into a trackless desert of live, shivering heat.

Now he was climbing. Climbing! How did he walk, let alone climb! Up and up, around and round. Across stretches of ground that burnt in open flame.

Once he fell to his hands and knees, and I was glad! Glad, I tell you. For I thought we would die there, and I wouldn't have to live and watch an unquenchable spirit push a body on that should have died long ago.

Then he got up! I cursed him. Cursed him like I have never cursed a man before. Cursed him because he would not lie down and die. Because he walked on. Walked? How did those legs keep moving? What kept him erect?

And then he teetered a moment on the brink of a cliff, and I screamed. He slipped and we dove off a precipice—a precipice of five hundred feet. Then the miracle happened.

**H**IS arm flashed up and caught the rim of the pass. A lurch that started at his finger-tips and exploded through his body stopped us. That hand should have been torn from its socket!

We swung there a moment and then he started to pull. I laughed insanely. That arm would never move again.

But I was wrong. Somehow he inched us up. Torturously, inch by inch, painstakingly, maddeningly he pulled us up with an arm that should have been incapable of pulling himself up at his normal weight, let alone both of us.

Now he was on his hands and knees, crawling forward.

He crept to the side of the pass, and grabbing a rock pulled himself to his feet and tottered on.

We were descending. Descending into nothingness. It was impossible to see more than ten feet in front of us. Down into a lake of living flame—and he was breathing it! I stared at him. He was mad! Must be mad—or inhuman!

A broad river flowed beneath us. A river throwing off such intense heat that I almost fainted from it—and I was wearing the helmet!

He waded into that river of flame. Waded into it and through it! The current drove at his legs. Threatened to throw him off balance. Perhaps it was our unguessable weight that saved us. Perhaps it was something else. But he was on the other side. And his legs were black almost to the hip! Crusted with burnt skin!

The rest I don't know. Excepting that the crew said they heard a thumping on the outside of the ship and sent one of the men in an extra-thick asbestos space suit to investigate. He drew both of us into the ship, then collapsed from the heat and the strain!

And they say more. They say the Captain wasn't unconscious when he entered the ship! They say he wasn't even insane! They say he kept repeating over and over again:

*"Soon, Mary. Soon."*

They patched him up as best they could. Swathed his burnt legs in rags soaking with oil. Constructed a pair of steel arches for his broken ones. Ground eye glasses for his dimmed eyes. And grafted new skin onto his head, where once hair had grown.

His lungs were unharmed! His legs, arms and trunk, muscularly were strained, but otherwise all right! The ship's doctor gasped when he examined the Captain's lungs. They were in perfect working order, not even burnt from the noxious, flaming vapors which had contained scarcely enough oxygen to keep him alive.

The doctor said those lungs were a miracle of nature. Said that his whole trunk was a miracle of natural inborn strength. And one hardened space rat even murmured something of courage—in an awed, subdued tone.

Courage? I say no! I saw that man's face. I saw those tears streaming from his eyes, tears that were not of heat alone. I saw the fear, the godliness in his face. I saw the despair in every line of him as he took step after step. And I know the meaning of those three words:

*"Soon, Mary. Soon!"*

Super strength? I know men and I know builds. Any man on the ship should have been able to beat him to helpless pulp—none of them could.

Then how did he ever win through that

flaming? How did he defeat Murphy? The answer is *he* didn't. His dream did! Perhaps some day you will understand.

WELL, we charted Saturn. Charted it from the big ship itself, and sailed back up through the pounding of those deadly rings out into space again.

The Captain was at his post. And all the men were *kind* to him. They knew what to do—he didn't. Still they didn't respect him! But they came as close to loving him as the hardened soul of a space man is capable of loving anyone. They went out of their way to make him think it was his ability, and his ability alone that kept the ship so carefully on the trajectory. That maintained the engines in perfect working order. That executed every phase of the journey in such smooth style.

I watched him at the ports of the ship. He wore thick glasses, and there were only a few strands of hair left to comb back on his head. Yet he was handsome. Magnificently so.

Glasses, bald head and all, the straight nose, the perfectly shaped mouth and chin, those black, deep, moody eyes, added up to masculine beauty.

He spoke to the others only occasionally now—but he often talked to me while I lay in my bunk, my legs swathed in plaster casts.

"Sure, this space job's tough," he said. "But it's worth it. A few years out here and they pay you enough to live comfortably the rest of your life. When I get back to earth, after our work's done, I'm quitting this job, and I'm going to get married, settle down."

"This life's all right for men like you, Shorty," he kept telling me. "You don't appreciate what it means to have someone at your side to share your sorrows and triumphs; to come home after a hard day's work and find someone you love waiting for you; to have children and live a new life again through them." Then he would sigh and grow silent.

Three months out of Saturn we ran into one of those things that space-liner companies don't advertise—an ether storm! A storm of pure, incredible force.

We were in the center of it before we could fully realize what was happening.

Something seized our ship and whirled it around and around so fast that we could simply hold on and pray.

The storm picked us up and whisked us away. At various times the universe would blink as though light couldn't keep up with us.

We seemed to be hurled across the cosmos, sent spinning on a mad journey of tremendous distances and incalculable speeds.

And just as suddenly as the storm hit us it quit. Left us stranded alone, in the midst of a strang universe!

Today people call the members of the Alpha Centauri expedition speed-demons. They traversed the distance of four light years in something less than six years. Our ship covered the same distance at the core of an etheric storm in *hours*!

We were a confused bunch when we finally had patched up all the broken bones and bruises among us. All previous space travel had been reckoned in millions of miles, not trillions!

Like a duck heads for water the Captain headed our ship for the nearest planet. It was a prosaic-appearing world, perhaps the size of Mars, perhaps smaller. Occasionally over its surface we could make out patches of what we believed was vegetation.

But needing orientation, something solid to begin our computations from, we landed.

You've doubtlessly read of the experiences space explorers have had with the inhabitants of other worlds. Perhaps fiction stories based upon such encounters have thrilled you.

Well, then, here is one to clip and put in your note book. Our ship had hardly bounced from the horny soil of the planet when every man aboard was as stiff and paralyzed as if he had been placed in a vise.

No one could wiggle as much as a finger.

And then the locks opened—*opened from the outside*!

And the most unbelievable sort of man I have ever seen entered.

HE was undeniably shaped in the form of a human. His features were as finely, as beautifully molded as a man can



conceive. And his skin was brown! But *such* a brown. It glittered. Light played over it in rippling waves of radiant color. Accentuating in beautiful bas-relief every line of his superb body.

The thing's eyes were as deep and limitless as the depths of a ruby.

Then we heard him!

"Strangers from space. We sighted you from afar. We have read your distant thoughts. You are primitive, evil, unspeakably evil things that we do not care to have contaminate our world. We order you to leave and never return. If you do not do so immediately we shall destroy you and your ship!"

And somehow you knew, darn well, **he** could do it. Do it as easily as he could snap a finger.

Then, suddenly the alien was only secondary and the Captain had taken the center of attention.

Every one of us was utterly paralyzed by a mental force that we could no more hope to fight than one can hope to blow back an avalanche, *but the Captain moved!* Moved a little finger!

Sweat poured off him as, with maddening slowness, he pushed one foot forward.

The brown creature stared at him as if he could not believe the testimony of his own eyes.

And then the Captain spoke! Spoke in a low, calm, deliberate, reproachful tone. Have you ever heard a man reprimand a Saint? We did then!

There was contempt in the Captain's voice. "You ought to feel ashamed," he began. "You ought to drop to your knees and beg these men's forgiveness. They're cruel, yes, they have never denied it. They are ruthless, certainly. Have they ever pretended to be lambs? They may be the scum of the universe, quite possibly, but when have they posed otherwise?"

"They were thrown into this universe by a force of nature stronger, greater than you or I can ever hope to be. They landed here in total ignorance of your existence. Only desiring to estimate their position with the poor wits at their disposal, so they might, some day, perhaps in decades, return to the planet that spawned them.

"They are more desirable, more coura-

geous than you. They weren't afraid to embark in their chip of metal; to battle the immense forces of nature. You, in all your superiority, are too cowardly to risk helping them out of their dilemma."

The brown creature stood motionless. A chastened expression upon his face.

Then we all heard, or thought we heard. "You are right, O strange one. We have acted shamefully. You have shown us that we are not omnipotent."

He dropped to his knees. "Will you please accept my apologies and the apologies of my people, and allow us to help you?"

**T**HE vise of paralysis dropped from every man. Stiff limbs cracked their protest at renewed motion. Glaring eyes stared from angry minds, wavering between revenge and fear. Fear of the great powers this alien commanded.

Instantly, with supreme understanding, he dispelled their doubts. A wave of his hand and three more of his race entered the ship.

"These men can help you solve your problems," he stated simply.

Uneasily at first, and then with the smoothness of men spurred on to common purpose, they began work with our pilots, attempting to divine the ship's position and place in the stars.

The leader of the men approached the Captain. "You have a mind as great, as understanding, as kind as any I have ever probed," he complimented. "Could I have the honor of showing you our city?"

The Captain accepted and I accompanied him. We emerged from the ship, and where we had landed there was no longer a wide, rocky waste, but a beautiful garden of plants and statues of exquisite construction. It was startling what the power of their minds had done to us. A little beyond there was a city. A city that reminded us somehow of the Orient, or how the Orient might have been if it had progressed forward, virile, instead of lapsing into premature decadence.

There were gigantic pagoda-like buildings. There were doorways with beautiful, grape-color drapes. There were plants that twined their way in harmonious taste up the sides of the buildings. And everywhere there were these graceful people.

But that was in general. There was one in particular. Llola!

**L**LOLA was a woman, a beautiful, brown woman. With eyes of golden glow, and a radiant, pulsat skin that lent irresistible charm to the shapely contours of her body. She was so desirable she took my breath away.

And she was introduced to the Captain.

Suddenly my mind discarded the thought of her physical charm for me. There was something else. There was the Captain's dream!

How would, how *could*, his dream compete with *her*!

Nature had gifted her with every device of beauty ever bestowed upon a woman, and the wonderful brain that all her people were endowed with.

Now I have seen women, breath-taking women, but I tell you, and I speak as a man who has been around, there was no woman, in all the nine worlds of Sol's brood, that could hope to compare with her!

So when they stood on a balcony beneath the seven moons of this world, with an atmosphere of inspired romance permeating the air, I clung to the shadows and listened, listened.

"Your ship will be ready to leave tomorrow," she began.

"That's fine," the Captain replied.

"But you do not need to go with them," she said.

I thought sure the pounding of my heart would give me away.

"You are different from them. You are a single gem among billions. You do not belong out there, out there in the void. You are a man who lives for love and loyalty alone. You would be happy here. Where there are others who think like you. Who would understand and respect you."

"It is very sweet of you to ask me to stay, Llola," he replied. "You, and all your people are wonderful. I could never hope to realize one iota of their greatness. But I cannot stay here. I can't tell you why. It's just that I can't."

I wanted to scream out. "Captain! Captain! Don't be a fool. She's right, you would be happy here. She loves you! She's done everything but throw herself at

your feet. She's offering you a chance at a life greater than any you could ever hope to know. Say yes! Stay here, with her, and let us space rats return where we belong."

But I couldn't! Something stilled my tongue. Ice chilled my brain into inactivity. I could only pray, pray for him.

"Captain," she said. "I know. I understand. But I understand too that you will only meet tragedy back there. Your mind is too sensitive to last long beneath the bludgeonings of a young, calloused civilization that is still fighting its way toward its distant dream of tomorrow. Always there will be things beyond your grasp. Always you will wish and wish and earn. Always you shall say: "When I have that, then I shall be happy." But when you have the desired object in your hand, you shall find the world has exacted so terrible a price for it that it crumbles to ashes in your hands."

"And if I stay here," the Captain answered. "I shall always wonder. Wonder if I killed a soul back there. A soul that possibly loves me, and I should be unhappy here too, eternally unhappy."

And when she turned away I knew his dream had won. His dream had beaten her as it had beaten every other thing it encountered. A dream that could not lose, even when it was the right thing to do!

I grabbed her hand as she emerged from the building.

"Llola," I said. "That poor sap doesn't know what's good for him. Save him, save him from himself."

And she looked at me, with wise, young beautiful eyes that were brimming with tears and said: "I am steeped in the lore of the ages, crude one, and even *I* am helpless to stop him!"

Then I wondered. Wondered at this dream—this Mary. What was she, that this Godly thing should meet defeat at the distant vision of her? How *could* a man love so true, so stubbornly over a gap of light years? And I turned away in frustration. My poor mind incapable of a solution.

**W**ELL, it didn't take us years to get back to civilization. No, it took us days! The brown men handed the Captain one tiny pill and said: "Drop this in

your fuel chambers and steer the course we have mapped for you."

When we opened the fuel chambers four light years from Alpha Centauri nothing of the amazing pill remained. Wisdom beyond our understanding had kept them from giving the secret of it to us permanently.

It took us days to travel four light years, it took us months more to traverse the distance from Pluto to Venus which was in closer conjunction to our direction of approach at the time than Earth.

We landed at the primitive refueling station in the heart of the jungle to take on supplies.

The entire crew emerged from their cramped quarters to stretch their legs in the steaming jungles of Venus.

The Captain strode off into the fantastic flora alone. I knew he was thinking. Thinking, long, deep thoughts, so I did not disturb him.

Then we heard a shout—and a scream—not a human scream—but the scream of the most dreaded of Venusian beasts—a Heleguite! Only one man had ever defeated a Venusian Heleguite in pitched battle—Big Murphy. And the Captain was out there alone.

Twenty of us leaped forward as one, armed with ray guns. We splashed through the boggy swamps and then drew up before a clearing. There stood the Captain, and advancing, scarcely ten feet away was a Venusian Heleguite. Its six powerful limbs groping hungrily for him. Its cavernous, reptilian mouth drooling saliva over its enormous teeth.

Before we could fire the monster had leaped at the Captain and buried him beneath its bulk! We closed our eyes to shut out the sight of the slaughter, and then almost fell to our knees in stunned surprise.

The Captain had squirmed out from beneath the creature, and set it back on its haunches with a terrific blow of a large, heavy branch he had picked up from the soggy ground!

It was as effective as holding off a wild dog with a stinging twig. The Heleguite came on, its six arms trying to grab the Captain, to draw him into its deadly embrace.

Two of them encircled his body. And

he fought back. Fought with the desperate incredible strength of a man who has everything to live for and doesn't want to die.

The glasses were knocked from his eyes and he stopped dead. Despair on his face. Those eyes of his, dimmed during the Saturn adventure could scarcely see more than shadows without them.

The Heleguite tore away at him. One huge talon ripped down the Captain's cheek and blood gushed forth.

The Captain screamed out one word.

"Mary!"

Then tooth and nail he tore into the animal. Over and over he whirled, the smaller trees snapping at the fury of the battle. Twice the Captain was whacked to the ground so hard that it scarcely seemed he could rise again, but always he strained upward, fighting back.

Have you ever seen a civilized, gentle, sensitive man tear a wild beast's throat with his teeth? We saw it then!

With his teeth, his poor blunt teeth, he bit into the Heleguite's throat with fanatical strength. And tore away like a wolf! And he must have snapped a vital artery for the green, foul blood that issued forth bathed him from head to foot, and he staggered off.

We rayed the dying Heleguite into a roasted mass of stinking flesh. Then carried the Captain back to the ship.

He was all right, but there was a jagged scar extending down the entire right side of his face that would be with him as long as he lived!

**W**E docked at Earth two weeks later. There were wild, cheering crowds in the streets. Two bands played raucously, but could scarcely be heard above the shouting of the multitude. Radio and television casters hemmed us in on every side. Ready to hear from our own lips the unbelievable tale we had radioed to them from space.

The entire planet lay at our feet. We were the men of the hour. To be feted and dined and forgotten! Forgotten as soon as the next batch of heroes came to port.

This was their hour of glory so the men drank it in to the utmost. All but the Captain—the Captain and I.

He didn't know I was behind him. Those gleaming eyes of his took cognizance of no one. He elbowed through the crowd, staring blankly ahead.

A vacuum car shot us with the speed of a bullet through the greatest metropolis of Earth.

We emerged from the tear shaped car, and raced up the stairway to the street, three steps at a hop.

Then I followed him—it was impossible to keep pace—through a maze of side-ways, passages and short-cuts—and stopped before a door—a very ordinary door, to me!

He opened the door without knocking. The door closed behind him and I waited.

I've always laughed at those jokes about "We've never lost a father yet," that are cracked pretty regularly around maternity wards. I'll never laugh at them again. I can understand just how the poor guys feel.

Twenty minutes passed, and I heard the door swing open. I turned, my face wreathed in smiles, my hand ready for congratulations—and froze still!

His face, burned by the cosmic rays, was ashen white! He staggered off the door way and I caught him before he fell.

"I should have known," he wept. "Those poor eyes of mine. My hairless head, that awful scar—how *could* she still love me!"

My own heart was bursting in two. A great sob welled in my throat and stayed there.

Gently as a mother, I guided him along the street, wishing the ground might open then and there and swallow us both.

Then a cripple from a doorway cackled.

"So you're the great explorer, eh? What do you know about *real* suffering? You've got it soft—a few months out in space—and you're set for life. You wouldn't know what it really meant to be hurt."

A red haze obscured vision. I stepped forward, ray gun in hand, to *kill* that cripple.

The Captain's voice stayed me.

"No! Shorty," he cried, "no!"

He turned to the fear-stricken cripple. "You're right," he told him. "*I wouldn't know what it really meant to be hurt!*" And he tossed the miserable man a roll of

bills big enough to choke a horse!

He returned to the dock and begged for an assignment to work on a ship leaving the very next day. They gave him the job, as Captain, and everyone of the rest of us enrolled with him!

"Shorty," he said, shortly after the take-off his eyes still burning with terrible hurt. "My dream isn't all gone. Not all. Half of it remains. I can still marry another girl, have children, forget myself and live their lives."

But he never returned to Earth.

THE crew cursed her. They cursed her in a tongue that I heard them use on a man once, who had deliberately sent ten thousand of his followers to their deaths. They cursed her with words that would remain, indelible, engraved on their minds.

They say the Captain died trying to mend a breach in the hull.

You will excuse me if I smile. Assuredly any other man would have died under similar circumstances, but not the Captain—not while he had his dream!

With his dream he was a superman, urged on to super-heroic deeds of strength and daring which his body and mind were incapable of under ordinary circumstances.

No, the Captain didn't die trying to repair a breach in the hull. He couldn't have, because there had never been a hole in the side of that ship!

It was simply that we could not go on any longer watching him fight back the pain as the blood choked over the fragments of his broken heart.

So one sleeping period I turned on the emergency alarm, sent out a fake S.O.S., and as the crew blasted away in their safety ships I had the medico inject the sleeping Captain with a solution calculated to hold him in suspended animation for six years.

We left him there, on the couch, after setting the automatic controls for Alpha Centauri, four light years away.

And as I watched the red flare of the ship's rockets wink out in that infinity of darkness, I whispered softly, under my breath, so others of the crew might not hear:

"He's all yours now, L!ola."

# A PLANET FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

By JAMES NORMAN

**With the grape-headed Uvans acting as the brains of the Universe, Mankind no longer needed to think for itself. So when a freebooter like Bill Petrie began getting original ideas, he caused a crisis that threatened the cosmos.**

*Illustrated by Morey*

THE first of the *things* to pass below him had round yellow eyes in the top of its head. The next one had an eye on each side, just below the ears. Soon they came in droves, crowding into the fantastic market-place, staring up at Bill with quizzical curiosity. There seemed to be no regularity at all about where they wore the eyes on their heads.

Bill Petrie didn't attempt to move. He couldn't. His chafed neck and wrists were firmly clamped within the slots of a medieval pillory. As he hung there, sweltering in the heat, he wondered how long he had been unconscious and how long in the pillory. Somehow, it was hard to believe he actually was where he was.

"Uva, north-ecliptic tangent, electric buzzer," he muttered fuzzily.

The Uva part of it made sense all right. but that was all. In the fast-paced life of 2451 A.D., Uva, or Planetoid eighty-one in the Sirius north-ecliptic tangent, held a unique position in the universe. It was the most respected, yet least visited, body in the skies. People called it the *brain-register* of the universe just as a certain dimly storied Wall Street had once been the cash register of the Earth.

It was generally known that there were natives on Uva whose heads resembled strange clusters of grapes and whose eyes had a disconcerting habit of never being in one regular place on their heads. Some years after the discovery of Uva by the Gonzales "space-shot" it was found that the Uvans had a peculiarly facile brain. They could take any problem, no matter how tough, and crack it down into simple formula. You gave them a problem and an equals sign—they gave you the answer. It was a wonderful discovery.

Brains were no longer at a premium. Uvans did all the thinking, technicians did the work and the Interworld Govern-

ment did the administering. It was administrators that counted now.

Bill Petrie wasn't an administrator. He was a freebooter, one of that rare, de-classed group who still clung to the idea that they could do their own thinking instead of having it done for them.

He squinted hard at the Uvans who crowded beneath the pillory and shuddered. Something was wrong. The Uvans were supposed to be very mild and not at all addicted to the use of ancient tortures. This time he shut his eyes and held them that way, cutting out sight while he tried to think back.

He recalled the first scene: shooting upward to the top offices of the Interworld Fuel Monopoly. . . .

BILL worked for the Monopoly as a kind of glorified errand boy. Everyone worked for monopolies in this day and age, freebooter or not. As he rode upward, he had an inkling that something important was disturbing the smoothly regulated mechanism of the world. The entire IWFM building buzzed with feverish activity.

"Another fuel crisis," Bill murmured thoughtfully. He stepped from the elevator and hurried down a hall to a door marked—*Commissioner Castlebottom, Fuel*. Bill rapped.

"Come in," said a voice. It was a smooth feminine voice, not Castlebottom's.

Bill entered and was stared at from behind a desk. The eyes that were fastened upon him were worried and balloon-like. They belonged to Castlebottom, a youngish, rotund individual with a great deal of front.

"So it's you at last," Castlebottom puffed. "Such delays! The crisis . . . etherol."





Bill sniffed, then jockeyed his eyes around, searching for the other voice. It was then that he caught his breath. . . .

Kitty Carlton was the woman of the moment, the toast of three worlds—Mars, Venus and Earth. The Planetoids didn't count for they were just colonies. Kitty was the very capable chief of the giant Cosmetics Monopoly. But she wasn't toasted for that. It was her very trim, blonde, dimpled loveliness that did the trick. Dressed in leatherine white from head to foot, she resembled a snow queen.

"Petrie!" Castlebottom's strained voice jarred Bill back into the present. "Pay attention, please! That's the trouble with you freebooters. Minds always wander."

"Do you blame me?" Bill murmured.

"The matter in hand," Castlebottom said, frowning and paying no attention to the girl. "You know there's an etheroel crisis? We've tapped the last fuel sands on Venus. Our supply will be gone within a month. You know what that means?"

"Where do I fit in?" Bill asked.

"This, precisely," said Castlebottom. "You leave for Planetoid Uva immediately. We can't spare anyone else. Here are the *equals* to be filled in by the Uvans. We've outlined the problem. We need a synthetic etheroel. The Uvans will give you the answer. Guard it with your life. Now you'll need credentials . . . wait . . ."

Castlebottom was up from his desk. He disappeared into a side office.

"Freebooter, eh?" It was Kitty Carlton. She had crossed the room and now sat on the edge of Castlebottom's desk, looking at Bill with frank, deep-blue eyes. "Very interesting. You're the first one I've ever seen this close. You don't look very different."

"So you think," Bill grinned. "You ought to hear my side of the difference. How about lunch any one of these years?"

The girl's penciled brows knitted. "With a freebooter? No!" Her lips parted with a vague smile. "But if you were . . . ah . . . for example, a monopoly commissioner like Tubby—"

"Tubby?" asked Bill.

"Yes, Castlebottom, my fiancé."

"You'd give me a buzz?"

"Perhaps."

Castlebottom returned to the room,

puffing with bureaucratic vigor. "Here are your credentials, Petrie," he said, handing Bill a metallic IWG diplomatic pass. "There's a Patrol cruiser waiting."

Bill took one look at Kitty Carlton and tossed the pass back upon the desk. "I'm not going!" he said.

"Not going!" Castlebottom exploded. "But the fuel crisis, man!"

"Get someone else. I said I'm staying. I'm working my way up to head a monopoly."

"You!" Castlebottom turned purple.

"Yeah, me. I'll think my way up. That's more than you ever did."

Castlebottom looked very threatening for a second. He clenched and unclenched his hands spasmodically, finally stabbing a pudgy finger at a pushbutton on his desk. He had the look of a conqueror as he stared toward the door.

Bill pivoted in time to see the three Monopoly Building policemen charge in. Each one was built on the order of an eight-gun space-destroyer and the result was about as devastating. Bill got in one sharp jab but a moment later the three destroyers carried him out. Bill's sandy hair was a bit mussed. His good-natured mouth was clamped tightly on a trickle of blood and the rest of his body felt like strenuously whipped eggs.

"Freebooter!" That was the last thing he heard Castlebottom saying. "Take him down to the cruiser."

**B**ILL was in no condition to appreciate the next few days. He sensed the wallowing of the IWP Cruiser as it hit difficult gravs and felt his ears dulled by the hollow drumming of the rocket pumps. Sometimes a mess-boy brought in food but more often, icepacks. Between icepacks, Bill figured a dozen ways of evening the score with Commissioner Castlebottom.

The plans were all very good, but with one exception. The next day, the Patrol Cruiser hovered over a planetoid surface described by astronomers as Uva. Castlebottom was back on Earth.

A Junior Officer ferried Bill from the Cruiser to the planetoid in a small auxiliary plane.

"We'll pick you up in fifty hours," said the officer.

"Why will it be that long?" asked Bill. "It'll take that long. You don't know the Uvans."

Bill made a wry face. "Why don't you come down and wait?"

"Can't," replied the officer noncommittally. "There's only one Interworld Government pass for landing on Uva. You've got it now. Even the Patrol is only allowed to land in cases of extreme emergency. They're strict about that. No visitors allowed."

The tiny plane settled quietly in what appeared to be the suburb of the only city on Uva. Bill dropped to the ground and breathed deeply of the somewhat muggy, compressed atmosphere of the little planetoid.

"The American Commissioner's place is straight up this street," said the officer. "So long!" He waved good-by and gunned the plane away. Bill watched it climb for a second, then turned, marching briskly up the street.

The germ of an idea—perhaps two ideas—chased around in his brain. "Maybe I'll get the Uvans to figure out a way for me to head a monopoly. Something quick," he thought. "If not, I can always hi-jack the synthetic etherol formula they'll give me. Castlebottom will give plenty for it."

He quickened his pace. The Uvan city closed about him. Bill wasn't paying much attention to it. He gave half-hearted notice to the rather wild, idiotic arrangement of buildings and streets. Almost everything was done in amber. Streets stemmed off from the main drag, then suddenly stopped flush against a building as though some absent-minded architect had laid the city out.

Something jerked Bill's arm. He turned and found himself staring. Then he gulped enormously. The *thing* was undoubtedly a native. It stood about four feet high and had a salt-cellar body, thick at the bottom and slim at the top, made of what appeared to be a translucent amber plastic. Then there was the head. It was bright purple and lumpy all over, like a cluster of lush grapes. It had ears on each side, a pointed mouth and a pair of eyes right under the lower lip.

A pair of tenuous arms waved before Bill. The eyes scrutinized him from under the lip with a vague sort of intelligence.

"Caviar," demanded the *thing*. It stretched one blade-like hand greedily forward.

Bill gasped. He felt dazed. Good Lord, these were the Uvans.

"Caviar?"

One of the grapes on the grape-cluster head of the Uvan flashed a yellow light. It blinked on and off like a busy signal on a telephone operator's switchboard. For an instant, the Uvan tried to look menacing.

Bill whipped out his credentials. The pass seemed to strike a responsive chord in the Uvan for the latter's two eyes saddened. "No caviar," he murmured. "No caviar. A sadness. Up revolution."

The last phrase had some sort of magical effect for no sooner had it been uttered, than the streets were filled with more Uvans. They crowded around, muttering, taking up the refrain—"Up revolution. No caviar. Up revolution."

Bill backed away cautiously. There was a sudden empty feeling at the pit of his stomach. Why hadn't Castlebottom or the Patrol told him about this business of caviar? Why hadn't they warned him the Uvans were touchy about revolution?

Some fifty of them gathered in the street now. The individual grape cells on their heads flashing brilliant lights. They were a motley array, like nothing Bill had ever seen. Somehow, they didn't attempt to attack. They just strung along behind him, muttering "revolution" left and right with amazing persistence.

Then Bill spied the InterWorld Government flag, bright gold on crimson, fluttering above a rambling low building—the American Commissioner's residence. He moved cautiously toward the doorway, afraid to excite the Uvans by too sudden a motion. At last he looked back. That was strange! The Uvans stood at a respectful distance.

Bill let out a sigh of relief and pushed the doorbell buzzer. He let out a wild yell. A fiery something grabbed his finger. Knives seemed to jab up his arm and slit down his spine. He reeled back among the Uvans who watched him as though this were all a very lively experiment.

"What the devil happened?" Bill gasped.

"Electric," answered one of the Uvans.

"Electric," Bill murmured. Then the

light dawned. The electric buzzer on the door wasn't insulated. He had punched a live wire.

The cumulative strain of being followed by the grape-headed natives, then the shock from the buzzer had its effects on Bill. His legs sagged uncertainly and a cold sweat broke out, bathing his brow. He reached in one pocket, bringing forth a handy flask of super-potent Venusian brandy and unscrewed the cap.

Raising the flask, he felt the searing warmth trickle down his throat. What happened an instant later couldn't have come from the brandy. Bill felt something hit him from all four sides. It had the composite solidness of an avalanche, a few battering rams and a dozen Uvans.

A second before his consciousness keeled over backward into a depthless funnel of darkness he was under the distinct impression of seeing his brandy flask spin upward, spilling liquor over an orange-eyed Uvan. But that wasn't all. The Uvan simply dissolved before his eyes like a sugar man soaked by water!

WITH his eyes still shut, his neck and wrists clamped in the pillory, these last thoughts flashed through Bill's mind. Was it a crime to drink on Uva? What about the caviar? Why had the Uvans jumped on him without explaining? What were they going to do now?

A bustle of excitement in the market-place caused him to open his eyes again. He saw the stubby bodied Uvans pushing two new pillories into place, one on each side of Bill's.

It was then that Bill gasped. His eyes blinked in incredible wonder. "It's not possible!" he murmured. The head thrust through the pillory on the right was familiarly dainty—yes, Kitty Carlton!

Bill's astonished eyes swerved to the left.

"Castlebottom!" he shouted.

Castlebottom, with his pudgy neck uncomfortably pinched in the tight pillory slot, fussed and fumed with impotent rage. "Get me out of here!" he cried. "Someone will suffer. I say, there!"

Bill grinned, highly pleased. He twisted his head around as far as it would go, looking toward Kitty Carlton. "You hardly look put out," he commented. The

girl did look rather pleased with the situation, despite the unyielding wooden collar.

Kitty smiled. "I'm not," she said.

"How'd you get here?"

"Very simple," said Kitty, her eyes flashing from Bill to Castlebottom. "Tubby wanted to marry me. I agreed to elope. It's so romantic you know. I thought Uva would be just the place."

"You mean Tubby . . . ah . . . Castlebottom agreed to elope and be married on Uva?"

"Well, he didn't know about that part of it!"

Bill grinned widely. "Something tells me you knew all along you'd be arrested the minute you brought a ship down here without entry credentials."

The outer fringe of the market-place crowd surged suddenly. Bill quickly swerved his glance, for a minute half expecting the Uvans to froth over and charge the pillories. This, however, seemed to be a wild surmise for the Uvans stood around, for all the world looking like a peaceful, deeply preoccupied convention of scientists and professors. Many of them carried umbrellas, some open, others closed. Many appeared to be puzzled as to why they were in the market-place at all.

Then Bill saw the cause of the disturbance. A lean, thatch-haired earthman moved through the crowd. He was dressed in a *mono*, the belted, coverall uniform strictly reserved for Interworld Government officials. The Uvans moved respectfully aside, opening a channel to the pillories.

He stopped directly before Bill and gazed up in a half bewildered fashion. "I'm Webster," he said. "Interworld Government representative on Uva. There's going to be a trial. I suppose you're the people up for trial?"

"A trial for what?" Bill asked.

Webster flashed Bill a disconcerted look, then turned and conferred with three official looking Uvans, some of whose eyes were at the backs of their heads. A low, earnest conversation ensued. Finally Webster fastened his eyes on Bill, appealingly.

"Do you mind telling me who's responsible?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Bill demanded, impatiently.

"Look here," said Webster, "you don't understand. There's going to be a trial. That's certain. But I might tell you for your own good, the Uvans are most absent-minded. They can't remember the charges against more than one person so I'd like to know which one of you is responsible. All of you can't be responsible. It just won't do. Now, which one of you caused the trouble?"

Bill glanced at Kitty, then at Castlebottom. Uva began to exhibit signs of unlimited promise for an alert freebooter. Bill twisted his pinioned left hand, crooking an accusing finger at Castlebottom.

"He's the trouble," said Bill. "Miss Carlton and I came together. I'll show you my credentials. We're here to get an *equals* for the Fuel Monopoly. This tubby chap stowed away on our ship. He's trying to smuggle liquor into Uva."

"Liquor?" A curious, tense note entered Webster's voice. "Liquor, did you say?"

"It's a bald lie. I did no such thing," Castlebottom protested chokingly. "You know who I am? Ask Miss Carlton. She'll tell you who I am."

Commissioner Webster stared appreciatively at Kitty Carlton who, even though her head was caught in a pillory, would still be the toast of three planets.

"I never saw the fat man in my life," Kitty protested.

"That settles it then," said Webster. "Liquor. Hmm, a sadness, too. It could have been something else." He conferred again with the Uvan officials.

A moment later the pillory holding Castlebottom was carted away to the local courthouse, the entire population of Uva following it. The stocks, holding Bill and Kitty were released, freeing them.

"That's nice," said Bill as he rubbed his neck and dropped to the ground beside Kitty and the Commissioner. "But what's going to happen to Castlebottom?"

Webster shook his head forlornly. "Oh, by the time they get him to the court and ready for trial they'll have forgotten the charges again. The Uvans are terribly absent-minded about little things like that. They'll bring him back to the market and

put him in the stocks again. It's the stock punishment. But now, let's get along and find you an office."

"An office?" Kitty Carlton interrupted.

Webster took her arm in colonial gentleman fashion and began walking.

"Yes, my dear," he said. "You'll both need an office. Everyone needs a place to think in. An office is best. You understand, Uva's principal industry is thinking. If you're to be here for any length of time you'll need an office."

Webster halted, let his eyes scan the oddly shaped buildings bordering the market-place, then he set off toward an empty stall in a nearby building. As he entered, followed by Bill and Kitty, he waved his hand elegantly. "This should do. Everything you'll need: umbrella stand, chairs and a do-not-disturb sign . . . ah . . . What's your name?"

"Petrie, Fuel Monopoly," said Bill.

Webster took a scrap of chalk from his pocket and scrawled a hasty, uneven sign on the amber sidewalk before the little office.

## PETRIE OFFICE FUEL MONOPOLY

"Now, let's go in," continued Webster. He hung out the do-not-disturb sign and pulled all the shades so that nothing could be seen of the street. Then, with exaggerated caution resulting only from life in a prohibition era, he brought forth a personal flask and three folding cups. "Got to be careful here," he added. "The Uvans are made mostly of resin. It's soluble in alcohol."

"Hah, so that's why the door buzzer on your residence gave me such a jump," Bill laughed. "Resin is a non-conductor of electricity. They don't need any insulation here, eh?"

"They're awfully absent-minded," smiled Kitty. "Has that anything to do with their brightness?"

Webster sipped his brandy slowly and discreetly.

"You don't know about the segmentation?" he asked.

"No," replied Kitty. "All that we know about Uva is what we're supposed to know. In fact, the outside world has the general impression that the Uvan *brain-register* is just one big puddle of brains.



You push a button and out comes an answer."

"Ah, such a sadness. Such misconception," Webster murmured.

"What about the segmentation?" asked Bill.

WEBSTER brightened and blinked his gentle eyes. "A most interesting phenomena," he began. "You recall the story about that warrior in ancient history—Napoleon. It is said that he had a mind like a file cabinet. He could open any drawer in his mind and think about what was in it to the exclusion of all else. Then, at will, he could shut off a particular thought just as one closes a drawer. The Uvans are like that. Their minds are segmented.

"Their faculty for thinking is as precise as a machine. All their thought efforts can concentrate in any one of the grape-like thought cells in their heads completely cutting out all other thoughts. That's why they're so absent-minded about little things. They have absolutely no administrative or practical ability. Administration required, not concentration, but spread."

"But how'd they get so bright?"

"Ah, just listen," said Webster. "Nature just happened to provide in this manner. However, the segmentation is a slow process. Uvans live to be about a hundred and fifty years old. After that, their resin bodies crystallize and flake away. They reach their *age of thought* at the age of one hundred and forty years which means they've only got about ten years for good active thinking. It's quite a problem. That's why the Interworld Government guards them so carefully.

"The young Uvans are nursed along through their first century and forty years of childhood as though they were gems. Very few get born and fewer attain their *age of thought*. The day of the final segmentation and solidifying of their brains is one of great celebration. The Uvans are a pleasant people. They love celebrations, particularly revolutionary ones."

Bill gulped on his liquor. "Caviar?" he gasped.

"Ah, caviar," Webster beamed. "You've heard of the caviar wars?"

"Wouldn't say I had," replied Bill.

Webster hesitated a moment, ran over

to the window and peeked out through the crack between the window and shade. He returned to his chair. "Where was I?"

"The caviar wars," Kitty prompted.

"Ah, yes. They figure a great deal in Uva's history. You remember that period in history when the world was still dominated by freebooters—not that I have anything against them—the Spaniards, under Gonzales, discovered Planetoid Uva. They called the natives here "*cabeza uvas*" or "grape-heads." Well, they tried exploiting the planetoid for various natural resources and consequently, many native Uvans died. It is also said that the Gonzales expedition, when it hit Uva, was carrying a cargo of Venusian caviar to delivery to Earth. It was used here as a trade medium.

"The Spaniards have always been unlucky as a colonial power, even in the space world. Discovering America, they took away gold without realizing the country was far more valuable than all its yellow metal. With Uva it was the same. They exploited certain natural resources without realizing that the Uvan natives, with their peculiar brain, were far more valuable as *brain-registers*."

"So," Bill interrupted, "When the Interworld Government was formed, Uva was restricted. We capitalized on nothing but their brains, eh?"

"Oh, it wasn't as easy as that," Webster shook his head. "We had to grant them autonomy. They're very revolutionary. Intergovernment laws don't apply on Uva. Even now there are difficulties. The only way we maintain any control is by judicious doles of caviar. But sometimes, when they all get the caviar bug at the same moment, a few lively anti-world government wars break out. You're not here for that, are you?"

"I'm here to get an *equals* formula," replied Bill. "The Fuel Monopoly is in a hole. The Venus etheroel supply is about run out."

"Etheroel!" Commissioner Webster jerked back suddenly, spilling his cup of liquor.

"Yeah, how do I get an *equals*?"

Webster shook his head worriedly. "You'll have to go to the *Uvan Thought Clinic*. Just present an *equals* there and they'll give you a completed answer."



Webster hesitated a second, fished into his pocket and brought out a personal calling card. He handed it to Bill. "There's liable to be some trouble," he added. "If you get in trouble, here's my card."

Webster jumped back again at the sound of footsteps shuffling near the door. He hastily hid the brandy flask and three cups, and not a moment too soon for Castlebottom and an Uvan guard who lugged a stubby radium-plate gun around without the vaguest notion of why he carried it, burst into the office.

"So! Stealing my fiancé, you despicable freebooter," he cried, shaking his fist at Bill.

"Tut, Tut," Bill grinned. "Watch out. You're under arrest. Whatever you say'll be held against you."

Castlebottom smouldered pinkly. "Arrest! You'll be under arrest. I've radioed the Patrol to rescue Kitty and me."

"They can't land," said Bill.

"They'll land. They're getting a special permit from the government. I saw to that too."

"I SAY, what are you going to do about this, freebooter?" Kitty asked. She seemed to thoroughly enjoy the entire situation. She stood with her back to Webster, staring at the two younger men.

Bill grinned wryly. "You asked for it," he said. "Come on!" His arm swept around her slim, belted waist, urging her toward the door and out in the marketplace.

"What are you doing?" cried Kitty.

"I'm doing a stitch in time, gal. I never run short of ideas. We're heading for the *Uvan Thought Clinic*. If I can get the right etheroel formula before the Patrol comes, I'll have Castlebottom where I want him. That formula means his job and I have an idea the Uvans don't give out duplicates."

"So that's freebooting?" The look that Kitty flashed Bill had something more in it than mere admiration.

"Hey, she's my girl!" Castlebottom bleated from the doorway. He stood there powerless for the Uvan guard's radium gun was poking a little valley in his stomach.

"Keep a sharp eye on him, Webster,"

Bill shouted back. "Dangerous type!"

A proposterous gurgle choked up Castlebottom's throat as Bill Petrie and Kitty Carlton disappeared, hand in hand, beyond the square.

The *Uvan Thought Clinic* was housed in a pale amber building. It contained twelve main halls, one dedicated to each of the major sciences. In an outer-reception room, an ancient Uvan whose resins-hard body was rapidly flaking away, fastened a pair of pearl gray eyes on Bill Petrie as he presented his credentials.

"Chemistry," said the oldster.

"Fuel," answered Bill.

The old Uvan led the way to a circular chamber. There, after elaborate preparations, he sat himself on a sort of throne that floated in a bed of pure mercury.

Kitty gripped Bill's hand, excitedly. "What's that for?" she asked.

"Don't know," Bill replied. "Maybe it insulates him from contact with matter. He can think better in the abstract."

The old Uvan nodded and sat rigidly upon the throne. Suddenly the lights dimmed within the chamber, leaving only a suspended glow that was like the infinite apartness and silence of the distant universe.

"I am suitable for thought," the old Uvan spoke in a vague tone. "Give me your equals."

Bill squeezed Kitty's arm, whispering, "I'm going to try something just to see how this works." He faced the Uvan and spoke aloud. "I have two equals. The first is something that my Boss needs. The second is for the Fuel Monopoly. Here's the first."

Bill handed the Uvan a prepared slip. It asked for a chemical formula which would react on the physical body of Castlebottom in a certain manner, producing a specified result. For a second the Uvan considered the slip, absorbing the requirements. Sudden lights glowed in the segmented grape-cells composing the Uvan's head. The lights shifted from one cell to another, flickering here and there.

Abruptly, all the lights went out but a small purplish glow in the grape-cell over the Uvan's right ear. "He's got the answer," Bill whispered.

" $\text{MgSO}_4 \cdot 7\text{N}_2\text{O}$  equals your problem," said the Uvan.

"Good!" Bill gasped. "Great Comets, these fellows never miss."

"But what's it the formula for?" Kitty asked.

"Epsom salts!"

"And the second equals?" demanded the vague-voiced Uvan.

Bill thrust a second slip forward. The one requiring a formula for synthetic etherol. Again the lights, blinking like bulbs in a bank of electric lights, hopped from segment to segment in the Uvan's head, feeling around, searching for the cell that contained the correct answer.

But now something queer happened. The lights began popping madly in all the cells. They blinked on and off and ran the gamut of colors. Instantly, the old Uvan leaped from his throne, clutched his grape-cluster head and began swearing a blue streak.

Bill jerked Kitty to one side, and just in time. The Uvan charged past her, grabbed a hammer and began beating out a wild clangor upon a brass gong near the doorway.

"Bill, what is it?" Kitty cried in alarm.

"Don't know and it doesn't sound comfortable," he grunted. "We'd better get out, quick!" With Kitty at his side, he raced toward the door, past the hammer-wielding Uvan and into the reception room of the building.

"Look! Bill!" There was a note of terror in Kitty's voice.

Through the numerous doorways that debouched into the reception room, dozens of angry eyed Uvans charged. Some of them carried radium-guns which, somehow, they forgot to use. Bill glanced around hastily, then ducked into an unblocked doorway with Kitty.

"A passageway," he hissed. "It leads out. Hurry."

Racing through the dim passageway, they came to another door. This opened upon a curving Uvan street. As Bill stepped through the doorway, he saw another mob of Uvans hurrying toward the building. By now, gongs were ringing wildly throughout the entire city.

"Something went very wrong," Bill muttered. "We're going to put a lot of space between us and town."

Both he and Kitty ran as fast as their legs could carry them, following the long

bed of the street. Behind them the pursuing crowd gathered in size and more natives came in from side streets.

"We're making it," gasped Kitty.

Bill glanced at the girl appreciatively. She wasn't only pretty but she was an athlete. She could run. Her face flushed with a clear golden healthiness as she matched strides with him.

A HALF mile more and they had cleared the limits of the Uvan metropolis. Bill's lungs burned for air. He had never done this much running in his life. He looked back, and thankfully, saw that the Uvans had been outdistanced and were giving up the chase. But—no!

There was still one Uvan following. Bill swore and tried to urge his feet on. Then, suddenly, the lone Uvan whizzed past them and came to a stop a short distance ahead. He stared back at Bill and Kitty, looking bewildered.

"Wait a second," murmured Bill, breathing heavily. "This may be a trick. Have you got your gun, Kitty?"

The girl shook her head.

The Uvan approached slowly, staring at Bill and the girl in friendly, though puzzled fashion. He was about an inch shorter than the average Uvan, sort of important looking and with his lavender eyes set close to the top of his head.

When he had come within ten feet, he halted again. "Please," he asked. "Who are we chasing?"

Bill's jaw sagged with surprise.

"You mean you don't know why you were running?" he demanded.

The Uvan shook his grape-clustered head. "I did know when I started, but I forgot," he answered apologetically. "I suppose you're Earthfolks. That's nice. My name's Olé. I'm chief editor of the *Uvan Clarion*."

"So you publish a paper here?" Kitty smiled.

"Yes, when we remember. How about letting me show you around?"

Bill stared at Kitty and Kitty stared at Bill. Both smiled.

"The first thing to see on Uva is . . ." The little Uvan named Olé pointed toward a structure which looked to Bill like a capped artesian well. It was then that Olé hurriedly changed his mind. "No, I

really can't show you that," he said.

"Why?" asked Bill.

"Why? Well, because the gongs would ring again. Then I'd have to run. So would you."

"Run?" Bill muttered. He looked at the well more carefully. The superstructure stood above a shack constructed of some amber substance. It was quiet. He could neither hear nor see any signs of activity. Somehow it gave him an idea. "Voices are telling me there's a guard inside there and I ought to have a look around," he said to himself.

Turning toward Kitty, he saw her blushing in deep embarrassment. Olé, the Uvan, was indulging in a bit of scientific research. He was poking his resin-hard finger into the soft flesh of Kitty's arm and marveling at the sight of the skin yielding to his touch.

"Soft, eh?" he announced in a high-pitched voice. "Are all you people soft like that?"

Bill shot the girl a warning glance and quickly disappeared in the direction of the well while Olé wasn't looking. If it had been Castlebottom touching Kitty, it would have been a different matter.

As he cut around to the far side of the amber well-shack, Bill abruptly came to a halt. He stood there for a second, motionless, barely daring to breathe. A Uvan guard, with an eye in front of his head and another in the back, crouched in the doorway. Bill waited another minute. The eye in front didn't move.

"Asleep," he murmured at last.

He moved silently, edging around the Uvan, finally gaining entry into the shack. His eyes swept around swiftly, taking in the jumble of motionless, rusted machinery, the pumps and the well-collar.

"They drilled here for something, and pumped something out," he thought aloud. He crossed to the well-collar where his gaze dropped upon a hand shut-off valve. The valve had been sealed.

Bill's eyes widened as he noted the date stamped on the seal. It was dated 2201 A.D. That was the year the Planetoid had been taken under the protective wing of the Interworld Government.

Curious, Bill fumbled with the seal. Then he made up his mind. "I'm in trouble now. May as well go the whole

hog." He jerked his arm, breaking the seal off. Then he twisted the valve, the rust flaking away as he forced it open.

Suddenly a gong thundered behind him. He pivoted in time to see the door guard bang an alarm gong with the butt of his radium-plate gun, then reverse the gun. Bill froze in his tracks, his hand tight upon the well valve, as he started into the muzzle of the leveled gun.

"Hey wait a second," he shouted at the guard.

The Uvan's head was ablaze with violently popping colored cell-lights. He banged the gong once more and then started to trigger his gun.

"Be reasonable!" Bill shouted. He lunged to one side, taking the shut-off valve handle with him. A liquid hissing burst in his ears. He glimpsed a stream of strong-smelling liquid shoot from the well valve, over his head, spearing the Uvan guard with a tremendous splash. Then he shook himself. He could hardly believe what his eyes saw. *The Uvan simply melted under the liquid!* In less than a minute there was nothing but a lump of resinous substance on the floor and a radium gun in the middle of it.

Bill shook his head as though he were suffering from a fantastic form of nightmare generally known as "space jitters." He jammed the shut-off valve back into place without actually accounting for his actions and stumbled out of the shack.

"Bill, where have you been?" It was Kitty.

"Where have I been? Great Comets, I know the ropes now! Let's get Webster before the Patrol comes."

"OH," said Uvan Commissioner Webster as he saw Bill, Kitty and Olé stumble into the parlor of his residence, "I thought you were the Tubby person. Made so much noise. He claims he's an important man—Commissioner of the Fuel Monopoly. Is that right?"

"Forget Tubby Castlebottom a moment," said Kitty. "Bill's made a discovery."

"A discovery? On Uva? That's impossible," said Webster.

"Impossible—nothing!" Bill cut in excitedly. He pushed Webster into a chair. "You know what? There's etheroel on

this planetoid. The real stuff. It's drilled and ready to take off. Come on now, give me the lowdown on why those wells are sealed? Why didn't you tell me?"

Commissioner Webster stiffened in his chair. His sunny features turned dead white. For a second he gaped at his three visitors, then he noticed that little Olé looked more scared than himself.

"Y-Y-You shouldn't have found the wells," he finally stuttered. "Oh, Lord, it's the taboo."

"Taboo? You mean you knew about the etheroel wells all this time?" Bill demanded in exasperation.

Webster nodded timidly. "Certainly. But I thought you came here merely to get a formula for the synthetic fuel."

"They wouldn't give it to me."

"No. I didn't imagine they would. But trying didn't hurt," explained Webster. "You see, it's the taboo. The undersurface of Uva is fantastically rich in etheroel reservoirs. When the Spaniards first controlled Uva they exploited the etheroel hand over fist because it was worth its weight in gold. But they were ruthless about it for etheroel, like everything that has an ether-alcohol base, is death to the Uvans."

"Dissolves them, eh?" said Bill.

Webster shot back a frightened glance. "Yes, the alcohol just tears down their resin bodies. The Spaniards made the mistake of forcing the Uvans to operate the wells. Cheap labor, you know. That's why the government sealed the wells. The Uvans were more valuable as *brain-registers* for the universe. Alcohol and caviar are the two things these people are never absent-minded about."

"Well, we've got to have that etheroel," Bill spoke firmly. "They won't give us a formula."

Webster began pacing the floor in small circles, glancing from Bill to Olé in a distraught manner. "It's a vicious circle," he muttered. "Indeed, a very vicious circle! It's up to the Interworld Government to choose between slaughtering all the Uvans if they uncap the wells, or not having the etheroel."

"It is tough, isn't it?" Bill nodded thoughtfully.

"Oh, that isn't all," replied Webster. "Don't you see what'll happen? No one

in the outside world is capable of making an independent decision of this magnitude. They've gotten in the habit of referring all major problems to the *Uvan Thought Clinic*. They'll refer this one back to the Uvans and you know how the Uvans stand on the question of etheroel. What we need is a good old fashioned freebooter to take up the matter."

"Freebooter!" A thoughtful frown creased Bill Petrie's handsome brow. He glanced at Olé, the Uvan editor, who blinked his top-side eyes worriedly. If Bill had had a grape-cell head, a few lights would have popped off and on in it at this instant for the shape of an idea was forming in his brain.

Suddenly he took Kitty's two hands in his own and, staring into her deep blue eyes, said: "Kitty, you're a very wealthy gal. I need some cash. Are you, or aren't you going to radio your bank and have them open your account unconditionally to a company I'm floating right now?"

The girl stared at him, startled. Perhaps the way he held her hands, or the look of earnestness in his gaze, did something to her. She suddenly smiled, murmuring, "Yes, Bill. I'm with you. What's the company?"

"I'll sound crazy," Bill grinned. He turned to Olé and collared the little man. "Listen, Olé," he explained quickly. "You go back to the square and find my office. Open it up. Put a sign in front—Uvan Caviar Import Company. You'll be sales manager."

"Caviar!" The little Uvan's face brightened.

Bill tied a couple of strings to Olé's fingers and shoved him out the door. "Those strings are to remind you what to do when you get to the office. I'll be over there in a minute. I've got work to do now." He faced Webster. "Where's your transmitter?"

"Bill, have you gone mad?" Kitty demanded.

"Not yet, honey!" He kissed Kitty briefly but effectively, adding, "Get the money transferred to my Import Company. Then you go out to the square and keep Castlebottom happy for a half hour. He's on the pillory again. I'll see you at the office."

A HALF hour later Bill Petrie stepped from the residence transmitter room with a smile of triumph on his lips. Webster, Kitty and Olé were nowhere about so he walked briskly through the fantastically laid out streets of Uva to the marketplace. There the smile faded from his mouth.

As his eyes swept the square, he knew something had gone wrong. Castlebottom was still on the pillory, sweating in the muggy heat, but the Uvans no longer crowded around him. The entire mass of resin-bodied grape heads were clamoring around Bill's office.

Bill pushed through the crowd until he came to the door where Webster stood, white faced and worried.

"They after the caviar already?" Bill grinned.

"Caviar!" Webster exclaimed. "No such thing. They've discovered that you tampered with the etheroel well and dissolved one of their people. They're working themselves up to a revolt. Give them a half hour and they'll tear us apart. This is serious."

"The patrol will be here any minute," Kitty said tensely.

Webster shook his head helplessly. "They won't do us any good. You don't know the Uvans."

The broad, heavy tones of an alarm gong vibrated across square. Uvans milled about, pressing in closer upon Bill's office entrance. Dry, high-pitched voices threw out angry cries. Hundreds of grape-cluster Uvan heads flashed their cell-like lights. Some could be seen in the daylight, some not.

Bill turned toward Olé whose own anger was slowly mounting a step behind that of the crowd in the marketplace. "Calm yourself," Bill spoke sharply. "You and your people want caviar, eh? Well, behave and you'll get it. All you want. I've got the company."

"You've got caviar?" Webster cut in.

Bill shouldered the government commissioner aside and spoke rapidly with Olé. "Here's what you do, little man," he said. "Go out there and sell them stock. Yeah. Stock in our Caviar Import Company. The real stuff will be on its way here in a day or two. Now get going! Take these sales contracts."

He gave the little Uvan a shove and sent him through the doorway. Olé disappeared in the crowd, talking fast as he entered it. Bill watched tensely, then after a minute he looked toward Webster and Kitty.

Webster's eyes shifted from the marketplace and met Bill's glance. The Commissioner's mouth opened, amazed. Out in the market, he had seen the sudden, incredible change that occurred among the Uvans. Their anger had turned to delighted excitement. They haggled, shouted and fought to buy up the Caviar Company stocks Olé offered.

Kitty stared at Bill accusingly. "It was a nice trick," she said. "But what makes you think they'll get any caviar?"

There was a grin on Bill's square face. "Simple," he said. "With your money, Webster's transmitter and my brain, I cornered the Interworld caviar market. Our company owns every speck of caviar that exists."

"But why?"

"Don't look so dazed, I organized the caviar to line up popular support behind me. All that I needed was the confidence of the Uvans because I've figured out a way of exploiting the etheroel wells without harming the Uvans."

Bill looked around triumphantly. "You want to hear?" he added.

"It's wonderful, Bill," Kitty murmured.

"You mean they won't dissolve?" asked Webster. A look of hope entered his eyes. "Will it work for whiskey too?"

Bill shook his head. "Afraid not," he said. "You see I did a lot of freebooting in chemistry when I worked for the Fuel Monopoly. I discovered you could hydrate etheroel the same as you hydrate diethyl ether. You just evaporate etheroel on thick blotting paper, subject it to a temperature of twenty-six degrees Fahrenheit and it becomes solid. We'll have Earthmen or Martians handle that operation. After it's solid, it won't harm the Uvans. They'll be able to ship it out. We'll dehydrate on some clearing planetoid."

"Excellent! Excellent!"

BILL whirled around at the first sound of the voice coming from the doorway. He saw Castlebottom standing there and behind him, three armed Space Pa-

trolmen. There was a very satisfied smirk on Castlebottom's lips and a very efficient look about the Patrolmen.

"Excellent thought," Castlebottom said in his most administrative manner, "The Fuel Monopoly appreciated what you've done to recover the Uvan etheroel supply. We'll send you a medal—in jail! Very lucky I overheard you." He signalled the patrolmen. "All right, men, arrest him for smuggling caviar, kidnapping me and my fiancé. You might tack on a few other charges. Anything will do."

There was a little cry as Kitty threw her arms around Bill and glared at Castlebottom. "You can't arrest him. Look what he's done."

"Hah!" grunted Castlebottom, rubbing his fingers over the ham-slice folds of his neck where the pillory clamps had fitted too tightly. "He hasn't got a foot to stand on. That is what comes of freebooting. He's already given us the answer on how to save the etheroel. We'll do it ourselves. We don't need him."

"Please," Kitty pleaded.

"Do you really mean that?" said Bill. He held Kitty's cheeks in his hands, turning her face up toward his. "I guess you do," he murmured.

Suddenly he pushed Kitty aside and stepped toward Castlebottom. "Well, maybe you win," he said slowly. "But if you're going to arrest me, do me a favor. Hold your chin out like . . . ah . . ."

Castlebottom thrust his chin forward. "Glad you're sensible about this," he said. "You mean, hold it like this?"

"That's right—perfect," exclaimed Bill.

Castlebottom's chin was tilted just right. Bill's arm suddenly went back, coiled, then shot forward with the speed and stroke of a precisely ground piston. There was a flabby crack of soft flesh being struck by harder flesh and knuckles. A kind of foolish look crossed Castlebottom's face for an instant, then he folded up like a deflated balloon. One of the Patrolmen caught him just as he hit the floor.

"That," said Bill as he licked his knuckles, "Is something I've always wanted to do."

A look of horror flashed in Kitty Carlton's eyes and she lifted a small hand to her lips. "Bill," she cried. "You shouldn't have. There's a twenty year sentence for striking a commissioner."

Castlebottom shook his head and leaned against the Patrolman who had picked him up. He tried desperately to reassemble his rage. "I'll have his hide for that!" he croaked. "Arrest him!"

Bill suddenly waved a warning finger. "You'll have nothing for that, Tubby boy. *I still hold the trump cards!* First of all, Interworld Laws don't apply on Uva. The government here, when it remembers it's a government, is autonomous. So you can't arrest me unless the Uvans do it. Furthermore you're going to drop all charges against Kitty, myself and anyone else."

"Drop charges!" Castlebottom revived and exploded. "You practically kidnapped Kitty!"

Bill shook his finger again. "Easy there," he smiled. "If you want any etheroel, you'd better forget everything, including Kitty. You see, I control the etheroel on Uva!"

Castlebottom fell back a step, white as a sheet. "What's this, a trick?" he demanded.

"No—just freebooting," Bill grinned. "My Caviar Import Company became a big holding company. For shares in the Caviar concern, the Uvans had only two things worth trading—brains and etheroel rights. Being a freebooter myself, why, should I want anyone else's brain. Since I still hold fifty-one per cent of the Caviar Company stocks, naturally I control the etheroel rights. Come to think of it, I'm the head of two monopolies. . . . Maybe three. . . . I don't think Kitty will mind!"

"I don't think so either." It was Kitty, speaking.

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*Illustrated by Bok*

# THIEF OF MARS

**By HENRY HASSE**

**Fate dealt Ron Jordan grim alternatives . . . death by decree of the Space Patrol, or murder at the hands of this ruthless Martian pirate.**

**R**ON JORDAN presented a disgusting sight of an Earthman in the last stages of dissipation, as he slouched along the single dark street of Halo City, the sardonically named pirate base on Ceres. Ron's clothing was dirty

and worn; his shoulders hunched carelessly and his arms dangled by his side. A week's growth of beard was on his face, and his hair was ragged and unkempt. If he had straightened from his slouch he would have been an inch over

six feet, with a lithe bulk that belied the height; and, despite his unsavory appearance at the present moment, his gray eyes in the dark face were startlingly clear.

The outward appearance was all a disguise, for Jordan had a mission here.

From the crude stone buildings on either side of the street came sounds of drunken laughter, the click of gambling wheels, and occasional curses as some player lost. And once Jordan saw the thin, blue flash of an electric pistol. He shrugged, knowing that life was cheap among these cut-throat pirates of many planets; he'd seen more than a score of men die in the single month he'd been here.

As he neared the end of the street, one of the doors near him opened and two men staggered out. One was a bulking Martian with dark, leathery face and heavy-lidded eyes. The other was an Earthman. The Martian, a little drunk, stumbled into Jordan and cursed. Jordan mumbled an apology and tried to move unobtrusively out of the way. At this, the Martian's lips curved. He turned to his champion and said contemptuously:

"Listen to him. He apologizes. The scum!" With that word, he struck Jordan hard across the face with the back of his hand.

Jordan took the blow, falling to the street and cringing. Hot anger flooded his brain at the insult, and his muscles quivered. However, he restrained himself, for he had long ago decided that his mission here could only be accomplished passively. He peered up through eyes that were dull now, and saw the Martian's hand slide to the pistol in his belt. Jordan tensed, ready to launch himself up.

But the Martian's companion stopped him when his hand was on the pistol. "Don't waste a charge on him. Besides he's useful to us around here—runs errands, cleans out the ships, etc. I think he's a little touched." He tapped his head significantly, looking pityingly down at Jordan.

Jordan peered up and allowed his lips to part in an idiotic grin, revealing teeth and gums that were purplish as though

from chewing the mind-destroying *Eishn* stems.

"You're right," the Martian said cruelly, "he's an *Eishn* hound. People who chew that stuff ought to live. Killing them'd be too merciful." He kicked Jordan in the ribs, and Jordan took that blow, too, clenching his teeth tight together. It would not do to make a stand yet.

He watched the two men move away, and then rose to his feet. It had been the smartest and safest thing he had done, never to have a pistol on him. No one was foolish enough to come to this pirate base unarmed, therefore they all looked upon him as "touched" and harmless. And he couldn't afford to get into any brawls—yet.

JORDAN reached the great hollow space at the end of the street. This served as a spaceport, with ships of all sizes and designs resting there in scattered profusion. Pirates came here whenever they pleased, set down for a day or a week, and then left for places unknown and unasked. The entire hollow was pretty well concealed between ragged black cliffs that sheered up sharply on both sides.

Now Jordan moved out among the ships, searching for the one he had heard had just arrived that morning. Thus he had searched in the month he had been here, taking a careful look at each new arrival. He was waiting for *one* ship only, knowing it would be only a matter of time until it set down here. He would wait six months, a year, if necessary, until the *Lucifer* came. And when it did. . . . Jordan's lips pressed into a tight little line, as his eyes became space-cold and vengeful.

Ron Jordan was here to clear his brother, Carl, who had been sentenced to the Venus prison-swamp for life on a charge of smuggling Silicytes.\* That

\* Entities of silicon found only on the large asteroids. Almost human in shape and actions, they possess a silicic life-base rather than carbon, and remain a puzzle to scientists who have studied them. Being comparatively docile, reasonably intelligent, and tireless workers, they were originally brought to Earth for purposes of cheap labor. It was soon discovered, however, that they could be very dangerous. They possessed a fantastic and insatiable appetite for metal, and if not closely watched would destroy any with which they came in contact—first corroding it by means of peculiar

crystalline emanations, and then digesting it. After some very calamitous experiences, the law was passed in 2139 forbidding any Silicytes being removed from the asteroids, on penalty of death.

was only a few months ago, and it was a false charge. Carl Jordan, stranded on Mars, had hired out to the *Lucifer*, a freighter purportedly scheduled for Earth. Instead, it had headed out toward Jupiter. It was the age-old shanghai trick. Four others besides Carl Jordan had been similarly duped. The owner and captain, a Martian named Tarnuff, explained that they'd be well paid upon reaching Callisto; and the men agreed, including Jordan. Then, reaching the asteroids, the ship set down on one of the large rocks and Tarnuff explained that they were to take on a cargo of Silicytes. The men, a villainous bunch anyway, still agreed—all except Jordan, who rebelled.

The men found a colony of Silicytes and were herding them into the ship when a Patrol ship was sighted sweeping upon them. Tarnuff, in return for Jordan's rebellion, knocked him out and left him on the asteroid. The Patrol ship pursued the *Lucifer* but lost it; then returned and found Carl Jordan there with the Silicytes. He had protested his innocence in vain, but in view of the circumstances he was only given a life sentence instead of the usual swift death penalty.

Now Ron Jordan peered around the hollow of the Ceres spaceport. More than a score of ships rested there. It was very dark but he recognized most of them. Then, on the far side, he saw it.

As he approached, and made out the design of the ship, his heart leaped. It might . . . it just possibly might be the one! It was a Martian freighter all right, although rather sleek and slim with a suggestion of speed. He came nearer. There were the side tubes, four of them horizontally one above the other, unusually far forward, just as Carl had described! Ron moved to the rear of the ship. Yes! There were the triple rear tubes, flexible, resting along the wide fin which could raise or lower them; they were huge, six feet in diameter, with smaller auxiliary tubes arranged circularly around them. Ron's heart was pounding now. If this wasn't the *Lucifer*, it must be a twin!

It was a solid black ship perfectly in keeping with the name.

He walked toward the prow, looking up at the circular ports as he passed; all were dark, apparently no one being aboard at present. He reached the prow, looked up for the name and saw it, dimly: *Martian Belle*. Ron's heart fell in his abrupt disappointment. Wrong, after all. It meant more weeks, perhaps months, of waiting, while his brother languished in the black Venus prison-swamp without news.

Ron started to walk away, when an idea occurred to him. He drew out a tiny torch, the only object he carried on him. It might be dangerous flashing a light around a strange ship, but he had to chance it. This ship was so very similar, that he had to be sure.

He clicked the penetro-button and flashed the powerful beam upward, playing it across the words *Martian Belle*. Then his heart leaped. A great square patch had been newly painted there! And beneath that patch his beam picked out the old letters: L-U-C-I-F-E-R.

WITHOUT wasting another second Jordan hurried to the dark cliff a short distance away. He found a narrow defile that led up into the rock; followed it, and reached a little cave. There, fumbling, he at last found the electro-pistol he had hidden beneath a pile of rocks. He hurried back to the spacer and pondered what to do; he had planned no further than this. Obviously, the only thing to do was await the return of the owner: the Martian, Tarnuff, he sincerely hoped. Ron settled down comfortably beneath the rear lateral fin to wait.

It must have been hours later. Ron was aware he had dozed several times. But now he heard footsteps approaching, and he jerked himself alert. Silently he crept beneath the under curve of the hull toward the main side portal. There he stood very still in the deeper darkness and watched a lone figure approaching. It was a Martian all right, he could tell that by the huge, vague bulk of him. Ron waited until he came within a few yards—then he stepped out and said:

"Hello, Tarnuff."

The Martian stopped suddenly; then

leaned forward, peering through the dark.

"An Earthman," he rasped. "What are you doing around my ship? Clear out of here!" He started to stride forward again, purposefully.

"Don't come any closer!" Jordan snapped. "I've got a pistol trained right on you."

The Martian looked down and saw it. He said tersely:

"How do you know my name? What do you want?"

Jordan didn't answer the first question, but smiled at the confirmation. "I want three things, Tarnuff. First I want you to toss your pistol over here on the ground. Next I want you to enter this ship ahead of me. Finally I want you to sign a paper. After which I may or may not let you go, depending on how you comply."

Tarnuff didn't move. He stood there staring.

"Quick—your pistol!" Jordan snapped. "Or you get a taste of mine!"

"Oh, no," Tarnuff was looking above Jordan's head. He went on quickly: "All right, Oruk, grab him!"

Jordan laughed aloud. "That old trick! I don't fall—"

His voice was cut off as two huge hands reached down and closed around his throat. At the same instant Tarnuff leaped forward and knocked the pistol from his hand.

"That old trick, eh? But sometimes it works. Nice going, Oruk."

"Heard voices—came to see," a gruff voice said.

Jordan was dangling, his toes barely touching the ground. He couldn't breathe. The hands tightened still more, as very powerful arms hauled him up into the airlock. There the hands loosened, and Jordan crumpled to the floor, half-conscious. He was barely aware of Tarnuff climbing in, and his voice saying:

"Throw him in one of the empty cabins, Oruk, then stand by in the rocket room. We're taking off. I'll attend to the brave Earthman later."

**R**ON came back to full consciousness, his head spinning dizzily as the blood rushed back. He was lying on the floor of a bare metal room. The door was

locked, as expected. Were they in space already? He hadn't heard the throb of the rockets. He rushed to the port and looked out. No, they were still resting in the dark hollow of Ceres. He tried the port, and to his surprise it swung open. That meant they'd be rising very soon, else Oruk wouldn't have been so careless.

Ron estimated his chances, and made up his mind quickly. He'd have to get out of here while he could, then find another entrance whereby he could gain the control room where Tarnuff was. At least the element of surprise would be in his favor. He clambered through the port and slid down the smooth curve of the ship, finally dropping to the ground ten feet below.

There were four airlocks, one pair amidships and the other pair near the prow. He tried them all. All were tightly sealed. He ran back toward the stern, looking up at the row of ports. But there were no handholds for him there, even if he could have leaped up and reached them. He stopped suddenly at the huge, rectangular under-hull repulsion plates. No, there was no entrance that way. Even as he looked at them, he heard their low steady hum begin; the entire hull began quivering. He ran on, and reached the rear fin just as the ship began to lift. With a little prayer he leaped and pulled himself up.

It was a foolhardy thing to do, Ron knew that, even as he was climbing atop a six-foot tube by using the smaller tubes as a ladder. He knew the atmosphere ended about a half-mile up; he also knew that if those tubes started blasting suddenly he'd be a cinder in no time at all.

He gained his precarious perch, and moved along toward the rocket-room port a dozen feet ahead of him. Luckily the spacer was lifting slowly. He reached the port and peered in. Oruk, a huge Jovian brute, was facing half away from Ron; his hands were on the fuel levers as though awaiting orders from Tarnuff.

The spacer stopped rising, just clear of the cliffs. The air was tenuous, barely breathable now. With frantic fingers Ron tugged at the rim around the heavy glass port. It was useless. At the same instant he saw Oruk throw several levers.

The small tubes on which Ron was standing began to vibrate, and he could feel increasing heat through his heavy shoes.

Desperately he raised one foot and crashed his heel against the glass. It rang hollowly, but didn't break. Oruk turned at the sound, a startled look on his huge stupid face. Again Ron lashed out, and a third time. The glass crashed inward just as Oruk advanced toward him with powerful long arms reaching out.

The heat under Ron's feet was unbearable now. Heedless of the ragged glass, he grabbed the upper edge of the port and launched his entire body through, feet first. His feet caught the advancing Oruk squarely in the chest and sent him staggering back. Ron himself crashed to the floor.

He arose just as Oruk came at him again with slow deliberateness. Ron glanced hurriedly around for a weapon, but there was nothing. He ducked under the reaching arms, crashed a blow to the Jovian's body and another to his face. He saw Oruk grin. He tried to escape the arms, but they found him and closed around him crushingly. Ron struggled, but his own arms were pressed tight in that relentless grip. He could only stare up into the grayish face that was still grinning. The breath was slowly leaving him, the pressure on his lungs agonizing. He brought his knee up sharply into Oruk's side, but couldn't reach it. Suddenly Tarnuff's voice came through the communicating tube:

"All right, Oruk, full power now. All tubes!"

The pressure of Oruk's arms loosened for a moment as he stared around. At the same time Ron feigned unconsciousness. His head dropped forward, and he allowed his whole body to go limp. Oruk dropped him to the floor and turned to the tube.

Instantly Ron was on his feet, but silently. One leap brought him to Oruk's side, and he snatched out the pistol. Even as the Jovian was turning, Ron pressed it hard against his side and released the trigger.

It wasn't an electro-gun, it was one of the Martian-style pistols that fired tiny atomic bullets. The bullet entered Oruk's side and exploded at once, tearing a gap-

ing hole through him. He staggered forward, his mouth open ludicrously as though he would speak; only a gurgling sound emerged, then he crashed to the floor.

RON wasted a moment to lean weakly against the wall. Suddenly he saw that the ship was rising again, the air of this room swiftly escaping through the shattered port. Tarnuff was calling:

"Oruk! I said full power!"

Ron leaped to an iron locker, wrenched it open and saw a pair of space-suits. Quickly he donned one, and clamped the helmet down just as the utter cold of space swept into the room. He pressed the oxygen-tank release and breathed gratefully as air came flowing into the helmet. Then he stepped to the bank of fuel levers and pulled them all down. The spacer leaped forward, leaving Ceres far behind as triple blasts of fire streamed from the huge tubes.

Pulling Oruk's huge body after him, Ron stepped quickly into the interior of the ship and stood a moment, listening. Not a sound came from Tarnuff, far forward in the control room. Ron dragged Oruk's body to the central airlock, and gave it a decent burial in space. Not until then did he divest himself of the cumbersome spacesuit. He examined the atom pistol and saw there were still five or six charges in the firing chamber. Then he moved forward, opened the control room door silently and stood just within the threshold.

Tarnuff was hunched over the calculation table, his back to the door. Once or twice he reached out and moved a directional-finder infinitesimally to agree with the chart. Ron watched silently, a grim smile on his lips. Not until Tarnuff straightened up from his task did Ron speak:

"For the second time, Tarnuff—hello."

The Martian whirled around in the seat, saw Ron with the pistol levelled.

"You!" he exclaimed, starting to spring up but sinking down again. "So—you broke out, eh? That clumsy fool, Oruk, wait'll I get my hands on him." His face darkened.

Ron laughed aloud. "You'll have a hard time doing that. Your strong-arm

pal is a thousand miles behind us in space by this time. Yes," he answered the other's questioning eyes, "I blasted a hole through him." He gestured to the Martian's belt. "I'll take that pistol now; I asked for it a little while ago, you remember. First stand up, then toss it to me—careful!"

Tarnuff obeyed, sullenly. Ron caught the pistol and jammed it in his belt.

"And now my electro-gun, please. That's right. Thanks. You've got your course charted?"

"Yes."

"For where?"

"Callisto."

"Good enough for the time being. Now lock those controls and sit down at the table again. We'll get down to business."

"I haven't any business with you, Earthman."

"Oh, yes you have, but you don't know it yet. Sit down!" Ron shoved the pistol at him meaningly.

Tarnuff complied, appearing more puzzled than he was sullen. But he did not remain puzzled long, as Ron drew out a folded paper and handed it to him.

"I'm Ron Jordan. The name may mean something to you when you've read that. You will then sign it, if you wish to ever leave this ship alive."

Ron watched him closely as he read, and he saw comprehension slowly dawn in the Martian's eyes. Tarnuff finished the brief, but concise story of the asteroid incident as related by Carl Jordan. Then he looked up with an almost contemptuous smile on his lips.

"Ah, yes, I remember now. Your brother, I presume. I had heard on the telecast that he was sentenced for smuggling Silicytes. Most unfortunate."

"Unfortunate for you, right now. Sign!"

Tarnuff calmly ignored the menacing pistol and said:

"But this statement implicates me most seriously, Ron Jordan. I do not like that."

"Sign," Ron said through clenched teeth, "or I blast you here and now."

Tarnuff shook his head. "That's one thing I know you won't do. Not without my signature. You need it too badly."

"Do I? You forget one thing, Tarnuff. The Patrol's still looking for a ship named

*Lucifer* and your attempt to disguise it was pretty clumsy. I had intended to let you escape at your convenience, but now I'll just have to take you *and* this ship back to Earth. That should be conclusive enough."

But Tarnuff was smiling blandly, leaning back in the chair. He was hugely amused at something, and Ron was vaguely worried without exactly knowing why.

"No, Ron Jordan," the Martian was saying. "I don't think you'll dare set this spacer on Earth or any other planet."

"Why not?"

"Because you know too well the penalty for Silicyte smuggling. Has it not occurred to you what my cargo is? I'm carrying a full load of Silicytes at this moment. As soon as you set down anywhere I'll swear to the authorities that you're my accomplice in this. They'll believe it, too, in view of what happened to your brother; they'll think slave trading runs in your family!" Tarnuff laughed harshly, looking up at Ron's suddenly perplexed face.

IT was several seconds before Ron could realize the implication of the words. Then he said explosively:

"I don't believe you!"

"You don't believe I've got the Silicytes aboard? Come and see for yourself."

Ron knew by the man's cool insolence that he spoke the truth. But he followed Tarnuff back into the ship anyway, keeping him at pistol point. The Martian unlocked and threw back several doors . . . and there were the Silicytes. Only twice in his life had Ron ever seen the queer creatures, and never at this close range.

They stood erect, and were roughly human in shape, but that's as far as the resemblance went. They were formed of thousands of faceted crystals which clung together with peculiar cohesion, flashing iridescently whenever they moved! Instead of arms, dozens of chain-like crystalline tentacles hung down from a position near the shoulders. The creatures appeared so brittle and fragile that it seemed they would fall apart at the slightest touch, but this was purely illusion. They possessed a dull sort of intelligence but obeyed instructions implicitly once



they understood, and they'd work for tremendous lengths of time to earn the scraps of metal which they absorbed and relished. For this reason they brought fabulous prices on such outposts as Callisto, despite the fact that the owners had to work them discreetly, hiding them whenever inspectors came.

"You see, Jordan?" Tarnuff said, closing the doors. "And that's only part of 'em. I've got over a hundred aboard. You can put the pistol away now, you won't need it." He moved past Ron and back to the control room.

Ron followed him slowly, pondering the unexpected and hazardous situation he found himself in. Hazardous because the Patrol had a special contingent in the asteroid lanes in an effort to stop the Silicyte smuggling which had reached unprecedented heights in the past year. Tarnuff was right—he dared not take this ship back to Earth now; and if a Patrol ship intercepted them in space, he'd soon be keeping Carl company in the Venus prison-swamp.

No he wouldn't, either! Worse than that. Caught red-handed with Silicytes in transit would mean the death penalty.

"Well, it's your move, Jordan." The Martian's voice, his entire mien, was one of amused complacency. He stepped to the controls. "Shall I re-chart for Earth?"

"No!" The word came explosively, and Ron was immediately sorry.

Tarnuff chuckled. "I thought not. Well?"

"We keep on for Callisto," Ron said with a finality he didn't feel. "It's nearer."

Tarnuff was still unperturbed. "Oh, I see. And there you turn me over to the authorities, eh? Well, Jordan, that means you cut your own throat; I meant it what I said; you're in this with me now."

Ron stood motionless, frowning and indecisive.

Tarnuff's voice was suddenly serious. "Come, Jordan, you're in a spot and you know it. So am I—I want to get these Silicytes through safely. So I'll make you a proposition. Come in this with me! I know how to land these things on Callisto and how to get rid of 'em. We'll have the cash an hour after we land there. This *was* to be my last load—it's getting

risky—but I know where I can get a hundred more, and with your help we can get them through too. We'll split fifty-fifty."

Ron smiled thinly, indicating the pistols in his belt. "You're in a hell of a position to be talking like that, Tarnuff. If I wanted the Silicytes I'd take 'em all. But I don't want any part of your filthy business!"

The smile on the Martian's leathery face faded into a dark frown. "Oh. Just like your brother, eh? All right, about this time tomorrow we'll be approaching Callisto, and what then? Maybe you'll be joining your brother. I've heard that the Venus swamp is a slow and hideous death. Some men prefer the swiftness of the Ray-chamber to it. . . ."

Ron knew that, and involuntarily he winced. He had come out here to clear Carl, he had waited a long weary month for the opportunity, and then he had bungled it.

Tarnuff pressed his advantage.

"Since you have a peculiar aversion to breaking the Earth-made laws, I can think of only one other way out of our little stalemate. A way which I, personally, prefer. But I wonder if you would dare?"

Ron looked at Tarnuff narrowly, and didn't like the smile which had appeared again on his face; there was a mocking challenge in it. Tarnuff went on:

"I would much prefer, in your Earth idiom, to comb you out of my hair and continue unhampered to Callisto. But as matters stand"—he glanced shrewdly at Ron's hand, which hovered near the weapons in his belt—"you have control of this ship at the present moment. On the other hand you need my signature on this statement to clear your brother of his sentence. True, the statement implicates me to the fullest extent of the law. . . ."

He paused, the smile on his face widened imperceptibly, and Ron nodded impatient agreement.

"Nevertheless," Tarnuff went on, "I will sign this damnatory statement."

Ron stepped forward eagerly. "You will? Good. Now you're talking."

"On one condition."

"No conditions!"

"I will sign this paper," the Martian

went on, "and I will keep it in my possession. My conditions are that if I give you a chance at it, you'll give me an equal chance to take over this ship again. In other words—one of us takes everything."

Ron frowned. "What are you driving at?"

"Exactly this. I intend that if this ship reaches Callisto, I'll be the only man alive on it. On the other hand it may reach Earth; if it does, you'll be the only man alive on it, and you'll have my signed statement clearing both yourself and your brother."

Ron was listening. "Go on," he said.

Tarnuff indicated the pistols in Ron's belt. "Two identical atom pistols there. The Martian *V'Nith*—you have heard of it?"

RON was suddenly tense, standing there; his brain was spinning with the idea. Yes, he had heard of it—the cunning dueling game which men like Tarnuff sometimes engaged in, mostly on the dark asteroids; the duel which called for the most infinite precision and cunning; in which the first mistake usually meant death.

Tarnuff was watching Ron shrewdly now; he saw his indecision; he said sharply:

"All or nothing, man! Get it over with quickly! After all, you've more to gain than I . . . your brother's life and your own."

"Also more to lose," Ron muttered. He glanced around the control cabin. "But here, in the ship? How—"

"No, of course not here! One loose atomic bullet would blast through the hull. We combat outside, and only one of us will enter this ship again."

Ron drew one of the Martian pistols, hoisted it thoughtfully in his hand. He had slain Oruk with it. That had been the first time he'd ever fired one. But he liked the easy, comfortable feel, every bit as familiar as his own electro-pistol.

"Well?" Tarnuff was impatient.

With a sudden surge of confidence Ron made up his mind.

"You're right, Tarnuff. We'll get it over with one way or the other! I think I'm as good a man as you at any game! Rules?"

Tarnuff, smiling, held up one finger. "One apiece."

"You're going to make it precise, eh? That's okay by me. I'm considered a pretty good shot with any kind of pistol."

"And I," replied Tarnuff with easy arrogance, "have killed four men on the asteroids in duels such as this. Marksmanship is not all."

Ron nodded. He removed the charges from both firing chambers, making very sure that only one charge was left in each.

"Your electro-pistol," Tarnuff said. "Leave it here in the control room. Not that I don't trust you, but everything must be equal."

"I've a better idea than that. I don't trust you either. Want to watch this?" Ron donned a space-suit again, stepped into the air-lock and hurled his electro-pistol far away into the void where it drifted out of reach forever. Tarnuff, watching from a port, nodded his satisfaction as Ron returned.

"And now the statement," Ron said, drawing the paper from his pocket. "Which you will sign, after first adding a P.S. absolving me entirely if I should be apprehended with these Silicytes on my hands."

Tarnuff looked up, smiling. "You think of everything, don't you?"

"It pays."

Tarnuff wrote for a minute, signed, and handed it to Ron. The latter read it and was satisfied.

Tarnuff took the paper from Ron's hands again and slipped it into his own pocket. "If I win I shall destroy this. If you win, which I doubt, you may take it from me at your convenience."

"You think of everything too. Okay," Ron shrugged. He held out the identical pistols. "Your choice, if it means anything."

"It doesn't, but I'll take this one." Tarnuff took one of the pistols and then climbed into a space-suit as Ron waited.

"Which air-locks?" Ron asked through the audio-phone in his helmet.

"I'd suggest the central ones. I'll take the port side and you the starboard. We'll enter the respective locks at the same instant, then into space. After that, well, only one of us will enter this ship again."

They moved into parallel corridors on opposite sides of the ship. Instantly Ron was alert, not trusting the Martian out of his sight now that they were both armed with a bullet apiece. But both their helmet phones were on. Ron stopped a moment and listened. He heard the other's amused voice:

"Stopping, Jordan? On to your airlock! Goodbye, but don't mind if I don't wish you good luck."

"The same to you." Ron entered his lock. The inner door closed automatically, and a few seconds later the outer door opened. He knew Tarnuff had done likewise, for he could hear the faint sound of the mechanism through his phones. Then he knew that Tarnuff had swung outside, for he heard a couple of metallic clicks as the magnetic shoes made contact on the outer, opposite side of the hull.

Satisfied, Ron moved out too, and his own shoes swung around in an arc to make contact.

FOR a single instant he was appalled at the utter, outer immensity, the sweeping darkness; then he did not look outward again, but clung to the hull, facing it. He knew the *Lucifer* was still speeding along on its full rocket blast, but not relative to him.

The helmet phones had given him an idea. He held his breath, listening. He heard the faint clicks of Tarnuff's shoes as he moved along on the opposite side. He seemed to be moving toward the bow. Then Ron heard a different click, as Tarnuff shut off his phone. Ron chuckled as he reached up and shut off his own. He was sure Tarnuff had done that deliberately, and probably was reversing his direction and moving sternward now.

Ron didn't move at all for a minute. He clung there lightly, peering up along the sweeping curve of the hull above his head, ready to use his pistol if Tarnuff should appear there. But Tarnuff didn't appear, and Ron thought it likely he wouldn't for awhile. He hadn't forgotten the other's words, "marksmanship is not all." One bullet apiece! Probably Tarnuff would try to make him waste his bullet, thus putting Ron at his mercy. That would be the logical thing to do.

Keeping this in mind, Ron moved carefully sternward. He held the pistol ready in his hand. Occasionally he peered upward along the curve, alert and ready for anything. He wondered what Tarnuff had in mind. But this wasn't a guessing game, it was far more deadly than that, and he'd have to be very sure before he fired his bullet.

But there was still another danger. This hull was his only world now and he was almost weightless. He clung to it fiercely as he inched along, knowing that it wouldn't take much of a shove to send him drifting free, out of its gravity forever. He looked along the straight line of it and saw the faint glow of the rocket blasts. His brain writhed at a sudden horrible thought. Would Tarnuff try to gain the control room again, change the course suddenly and thus shake him off into space?

At this thought Ron hurried his progress a little, making for the four parallel side tubes he could see a little distance away. They were the only tubes that weren't blasting, being used only in emergency; they would allow him firmer footage, and maybe it would be a good idea to wait there until Tarnuff came somewhere in sight.

As he neared these tubes, something seemed wrong with them. There was something else there—a vague dark blur—between the second and third tubes. Ron stopped suddenly. Could Tarnuff have reached there already? No, that was impossible. He moved forward cautiously, and the blur didn't stir.

And then Ron saw what it was. And he was glad he had shut off his helmet phone, for he laughed loudly, a little hysterically, the sound almost bursting his ear-drums inside the helmet.

Wedge between those horizontally parallel tubes was Oruk's huge body which Ron had thought he had buried in space! Apparently it had been caught in the gravity of the ship again, and had slid slowly along the hull, luckily right in line with those tubes, to finally come to rest there.

Ron had been indecisive. Now he felt his brain become suddenly cool and concise. He knew what he must do. It had been pure luck that he had taken the star-

board side instead of Tarnuff. It was an omen.

But it would be risky. Ron suddenly sobered, moved along until he could grasp Oruk by the collar. He tugged. The body was wedged tight, just fitting the space between the tubes. Ron thrust the pistol into his belt and used both hands. At last the body came free.

He saw that he'd have to leave the pistol in his belt now. If Tarnuff should suddenly appear somewhere over the curve of the hull, it would be the end. But he'd have to risk it.

Hugging the body tightly to him, he moved a little higher, up to the long line of circular ports. He moved slowly back toward the center of the ship, peering into each glassite port as he passed. But he couldn't find what he was looking for; all was dark within.

At last he came to one that wasn't so dark. He saw a faint scintillation of color. Silicytes! There were at least a score of them in this cabin into which he peered. He had almost forgotten about them, but now he was glad of their faint flashing light, for he saw what he sought: one of the lockers containing space-suits.

He knew the Silicytes could live in airless space, so he didn't hesitate. A few blows with his metallic shoe, and the port shattered.

It was almost his undoing. The rush of air from the room came so suddenly it almost swept him away into space. Just in time he grasped the edge of the circular opening with one hand, clung tenaciously to his gruesome burden with the other. Then the air was gone, and he shoved Oruk's body into the room ahead of him.

Instantly the Silicytes crowded around, their chain-like tentacles clashing, reaching out toward him. Ron could feel their crystal coldness even through his space-suit. He shoved them recklessly out of the way, knowing they were harmless. At last he procured a space-suit, and then came a job not to his liking—fitting Oruk's huge body into it. At last, however, it was accomplished. He shoved the bulging, helmeted figure outside again, and climbed out beside it.

Ron's lips tightened grimly now. If

his luck held, he'd make Tarnuff waste his bullet. . . .

But where was Tarnuff? For a second Ron thought of clicking on his phone again and calling out, to see what would happen. But no—that would give his own position away. If he didn't know where Tarnuff was, neither did the Martian know where he was.

Ron took a guess and moved toward the stern again.

He knew he would have to be doubly careful now, and yet paradoxically he'd have to take a chance. With difficulty he held the space-suited figure close to his side. As he came ever nearer the stern he began to move oblique upward, peering intently all along the hull's horizon for a sight of Tarnuff. Would this trick work? Perhaps Tarnuff wouldn't fire at the first sight of a space-helmeted figure, as Ron hoped. And yet—why not? He'd be expecting no other moving figure out there except Ron's.

Ron was almost at the stern tubes now. He began to wonder if Tarnuff had taken the other direction after all, toward the bow off the ship. He took a firmer hold on the body beside him, moved a few more feet obliquely upward, and then . . . he had guessed right! He saw the Martian!

**R**ON caught only a glimpse of him, flattened against the hull with his pistol held ready, before he jerked his own head down again. He looked at Oruk's dead grayish face inside the plate so close to his own. He could only hope that Tarnuff wouldn't recognize it. Luckily the two helmets were identical, and Ron was sure that if Tarnuff fired at all, it would be at the face-plate.

It was a gruesome thing to do, but this was no time for squeamishness, Ron thought, as he began easing the body up inches at a time. It was the age-old trick to draw the enemies fire.

Nothing happened. He pushed the body higher, almost recklessly, but maintained a firm grip on it. Still higher. He was sure it must be at least partially in Tarnuff's line of vision by now. Why didn't he fire? Could he have detected—

And then it did happen, so suddenly that Ron couldn't even gasp his surprise.

There was an abrupt puff of atomic dust above him; at the same instant he felt Oruk's body torn spinning out of his grasp. Then he saw the space-suited figure drifting lazily outward. It was grotesque, headless.

The ruse had worked! Tarnuff had fired his bullet, and very accurately! Ron felt a fierce surge of exultation as he drew his own pistol and then hauled himself swiftly up into Tarnuff's sight.

Tarnuff had risen to his feet. He still held the pistol loosely in his hand. A satisfied little smile was on his lips. Then he caught sight of Ron, the smile vanished, the pistol fell and went skidding lightly across the hull. The expression on his face was so ludicrous that Ron wanted to laugh. Instead, he reached up and clicked on his helmet phone, motioning Tarnuff to do the same.

"Beat you!" Ron cried fiercely. "Beat you at your own game, Tarnuff, and it was easy! Now, before I kill you, I want you to know it's going to be the greatest pleasure of my life!"

Tarnuff looked out at the drifting body he had just blasted. He nodded, and when he spoke his voice almost purred.

"Ah, now I see. Clever, Jordan, very clever. But don't congratulate yourself too soon, because you haven't won yet! We're back at the stalemate again. Why don't you pull the trigger, Jordan? Go ahead and pull it—and blast yourself to dust!"

Startled, Ron looked down at the weapon in his hand. Now it was Tarnuff who was exultant as he went on:

"You never had a chance, Jordan! Never from the beginning! You see, I counted on your Earth chivalry, and you did just what I expected—gave me my choice of what you thought were identical pistols. But they aren't identical! The one you now hold works in reverse! Such reverse pistols have stood me in good stead on several occasions, and I always make it a point to have one with me. Fire it—and you blast yourself, not me!"

THEY stood facing each other, perhaps thirty feet apart. Tarnuff glanced down and saw the pistol he had dropped. He reached out with his foot and slid it along the hull to Jordon.

"There you are. If you'll compare the two, you'll see that the firing mechanism of yours is in reverse. One needs to look very closely to detect the difference."

Ron didn't bother to pick up the weapon.

"You know I don't know a thing about these Martian pistols, Tarnuff."

"Exactly. You don't."

Ron glanced at the gun in his hand, keeping a wary eye on Tarnuff. The strange weapon looked all right to him—and yet even his inexperienced eye saw that it *might* very easily have been tampered with so that the atomic bullet would explode in the chamber. He did know that these were dangerous and tricky weapons, and that's why most men preferred the Earth electro-pistols.

"All right, Tarnuff, we'll settle it without weapons! I—"

Ron stopped suddenly. Something was wrong with Tarnuff. The Martian was staring past him, real horror on his face and in his voice as he whispered hoarsely:

"My God . . . Jordan!"

Ron knew this was no trick. Tarnuff was terrified.

Ron whirled, stared—and became frozen. The pistol, Tarnuff, everything else was forgotten as he felt a chill go up his spine at the sight.

Literally dozens of Silicytes were swarming all over the hull amidships . . . and they seemed to be absorbing the metal, literally devouring it, digesting it! Already a gaping hole was in the hull, and it grew even larger as more Silicytes came swarming up from below, to join in the fantastic meal!

"You did this!" Tarnuff was shrieking now at Ron. "You fool, you must have let them out one of the portholes! I had those rooms lined with wood, the one thing they won't digest—and you let them escape!"

Ron paid little heed to Tarnuff's raging, but went leaping toward the Silicytes, with some notion of throwing them off into space, anything to get them away from there. But he couldn't even reach them. When he was yet yards away, he felt a fierce heat exuding from them, heat generated by the digested metal! And he saw them becoming slowly, rosy radiant.

The heat drove Ron away. He turned

and walked back toward Tarnuff again. The latter hadn't moved.

"Well, Jordan," he grated, "I hope you're satisfied with your bungling! Here goes the *Lucifer* right from under us, thanks to you. There's enough oxygen in these space-suits for about one more hour."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it!" Ron laughed suddenly, laughed in joyous relief, and pointed. "Look! Here comes help, and just in the neck of time!"

Far behind them a tiny silvery dot was barely discernible against the darkness; but it grew steadily larger as it took on the shape of a space-ship, moving unmistakably toward them. They watched in silence as it came nearer.

Suddenly Tarnuff exclaimed:

"Help, did you say, Jordan? Here comes the final touch, you mean—our finish! That's a patroller!"

"Are you sure of that, Tarnuff?"

"Sure of it? Man, I've been dodging the Patrol so much out here that I can tell 'em a million miles off!"

"So—I win after all, Tarnuff! That statement you signed absolves me. Let 'em come!" Ron waved his arms wildly in the direction of the approaching ship. "Come on you birds, step on it!"

Tarnuff reached suddenly in his pocket and brought out the folded paper.

"Yes, it does clear you, doesn't it? You and your brother both! Thanks for reminding me, Jordan, in the excitement I almost forgot about that. . . ."

And then Tarnuff's voice became shrill with maniac glee:

"But it won't do either of you any good! By the time that Patrol ship gets here there won't be any paper!"

He whirled suddenly and leaped toward the stern rocket tubes only a few yards away.

In a flash of horror Ron realized his intention—to destroy that paper in the rocket blast! Ron took two bounding steps after him, and then realized he could never catch him in time. But Ron still held the atom pistol. He swung his arm stiffly up in a straight line with Tarnuff's back, and pulled the trigger.

It was a purely instinctive action, and not until a split second later did Ron

realize it. And he laughed wildly then, for Tarnuff *had* been bluffing about that pistol; there was no reverse action to it. He saw the center of Tarnuff's back explode in ghastly devastation. Then Tarnuff, or what was left of him, plunged head foremost down along the sharp curve of the hull toward the rocket tubes.

Ron leaped after him, but it was too late. He saw the crumpled paper jarred from Tarnuff's outflung hand. It drifted lazily on, down over the rocket tube and then out into the blast, where it vanished in an insignificant little puff of flame.

Ron was suddenly very weary. He didn't move from where he stood, he just sat down there, bowed his head in his hands, and waited.

"HELLO, hello. Jordan, is it? Can you hear us? Hello!" The voice came so faintly in Ron's ears that it sounded like a dream. He lifted his head, stared around, and then realized it was coming through his phone.

"Yeah, I hear you," he replied tonelessly, looking out at the Patrol ship which was nearer than he had supposed.

"Commander Graham of Patrol ship *Terra* speaking! Lucky thing for you, Jordan—we've had you in our magniview plate for the past half-hour, and in our phones for the past ten minutes. We heard everything, so don't worry, you're in the clear. That is the *Lucifer* I suppose?"

"You suppose right, Commander! Come and get it!"

Ron looked back at the Silicytes. They were still at it! The damn things were insatiable! The gaping hole had widened perceptibly, and they were working in his direction now. Ron could almost imagine he felt the heat of them already.

He leaped to his feet and turned on his helmet phone full power.

"Hey, Commander!" he yelled. "Pardon me for asking, but how long would it take you to hurry? You'd better get here in five minutes or I'll be a mere hunk of dessert for these animated rock-piles. Step on those rockets!"

He heard someone chuckling, and then he sighed his relief as he saw the Patroller respond with full blast.





Illustrated by  
Stevens

# THE MERCURIAN

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG

**For ages Mankind labelled Mercury a dead world—a red-hot, seething outpost of hell. Too late Rawley learned of the hideous life that molten, steaming planet spawned!**

**W**E stood before the airlock, the old man and I, and watched them go out. Ellison was a granite man and I was just the lad who threw the switches.

I was new at it. They had sent me out with a pat on the back and a commission, but I didn't feel like a Mercury run officer. Mining uranium on the Sun's firstling was no job for a green kid of twenty-

two. Outside were lakes of molten zinc and a temperature of 790 degrees Fahr.

No part of that temperature seeped into us, but just knowing it was out there was spine-chilling. I am not being facetious. To keep from thinking of the hot face we thought of the cold face, and you can't imagine extremes of cold without feeling shivery. Out on the cold face were other miners, working under conditions I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. They had the cold of open space to contend with, and a little of *that* seeped in.

The Commander was passing out advice to each of the miners as they stepped into the lock.

"Murphy, it's uranium we want. We're not zoologists. The next time you go specimen chasing—"

"But it looked like a frog, Chief. I swear it did."

"You know damn' well no froglike animal could hop around on red-hot rocks."

"I won't let him out of my sight this time, sir," said the miner at Murphy's heels.

"Thank you, Haines. He needs a nurse, but do what you can."

Five miners stepped out, each with a glance from Ellison which said as plain as words that he would walk beside them until they came back in again. The old man had so much quiet strength that he could split off simulacra of himself, and send them out through the airlock by just passing out advice. He moved like a living presence over the semi-molten Mercurian crust beside each of his men, fretting when a coupling slipped or mysterious stirrings caused the lads to look at one another with a wild surmise.

He knew that the merciless heat beating down did something to the scarred and cracked surface rocks which made them seem to buckle and split up into little leaping ghosts, and half his warnings were directed against "heat-devils" and other optical illusions.

When the last man had passed out he turned to me with a wry smile. "Dave, speaking as a psychiatrist, and without knowing for sure, I've a hunch there is too much tension inside of you."

The old man actually was a psychiatrist. You have to be pretty nearly everything to qualify as a Mercury run commander

and Ellison's knowledge started with Aasen and ended with Zwolle. There were some gaps in between, but not many, and he frequently surprised me by pulling rabbits out of those.

We went down into the cuddy and the old man brought out some real smoky Scotch, and we had at least three while a strained look came into his face. One of these days someone is going to stop putting bulkhead chronometers in the cuddies of Mercury run spaceships. Men have to go out and Commanders have to wait, and if an officer can't get his mind off the seconds in a cuddy what chance has he of relaxing at all?

Hanging on the corrugated metal bulkhead were curios from all over the Solar System, and I tried to interest myself in the things the Commander had collected in his travels. A dried Venusian weejee head looks pretty grotesque, but so does a deep-sea fish from home, and when you've seen both dozens of times—

A sudden vibrant humming made me spill a jigger of Scotch on my liberty uniform. The lad who was taking my place at the lock control was buzzing the old man from the "peel off" room. Ellison swung about, and barked into the auxiliary circuit audiocoil. "Well?"

"The men have returned, sir."

"All right. Keep the inner locks closed and watch the insulators. Rawley is taking over."

**B**ETWEEN the outer and inner locks we had to cool off the men a little. When they stepped in from the crust the sheath couplings on their non-combustible suits had to be sprayed over with liquid air.

We went up in the jacket-lift with our knees braced and down the stern passageway to the "peel off" room, the old man striding on ahead of me. Had I stopped to reflect I might have realized there was trouble brewing. The old man wasn't psychic exactly, but his hunches came out pat.

Before I looked through the lock port my nerves were merely jumpy, but when I actually saw Murphy standing in the freeze vault enveloped in smoke and sizzle I nearly passed out from shock.

Murphy was waving his arms up and

down and the man behind him was making frantic signs to us. The frog was dangling by its long legs from the Irishman's gloved right hand. It was about three feet in height. Every time he raised it up it tried to leap in his hand, and twisted its eyes around.

Some quirk of parallel evolution had given it a froglike face, webbed feet and long, powerful hindlimbs. But, of course, it wasn't a frog. It was a Mercurian animal, and my stomach went tight ten seconds after I laid eyes on it.

I've said that I was just a green kid. The old man thought otherwise, but he was wrong and I proceeded to prove it. I turned on the freeze conduits. Liquid air poured into the vault over Murphy and he stopped gesticulating. He just stood there looking at me through the eye-piece of his helmet.

Murphy had gone out at the risk of his life and brought back a living Mercurian animal. When he perceived that I had frozen that frog to a crisp something must have gone dead inside him. When he came in through the inner locks his couplings were coated with frost and there was a look of anguish on the upper part of his face. Behind the eye-piece his features seemed all wrenched apart. From his gloved right hand the frog still dangled, but its squirmings had ceased. Its limbs were rigid, its stalked eyes frozen shut.

With shaking fingers Murphy removed his helmet and started peeling off his suit, his gaze riveted on my face. The other miners stood watching him as though fearful of what he might do.

The old man laid a hand on my arm. "You'd better go below, Dave."

Murphy shook his head. "No, no, let the lad stay."

He had laid the frog on the deck and was pushing his suit down below his knees. I noticed that his features were twitching, but I thought he was making an effort to control his anger until he came up out of that crouch with all his strength riding on his fists.

He clipped me on the side of the head, and delivered a blow to my midriff which sent me reeling back against the bulkhead.

The old man leapt between us. "Watch yourself, Murphy," he thundered. "I'm still in command here."

Murphy spat on the deck, a slow flush creeping up over his face. "I just can't figure it," he muttered. "I saw an infant once without one, but its skull tapered and it had to be fed through a tube."

I had always liked Murphy, but suddenly I saw red. I jumped him, and for a minute it was touch and go. We rolled over on the deck, exchanging hammer blows. He was hampered by the tangle his legs were in, but he made good use of his fists.

The old man had to intervene again. He accomplished it by backing up his tuggings with profanity. He cast aspersions on our ancestry, and threatened us with the psycho-lash.

I'm hot-tempered, but I cool off quickly. The instant I realized I was making it tough for the old man I struggled to my feet, and held out my hand.

"Any time you're ready, Murphy," I said.

The Irishman rose groggily, shaking his head to clear it. He stood for a minute staring incredulously at my extended palm, his eyebrows twitching. Then his own hand went out and locked with mine.

"I guess I was a bit hasty, lad," he said.

TEN minutes later Sylvia was placing cool pads on my face, one on each cheek, and shaking her head over my blackened eye. "I'm not really sorry for you, Dave," she said. "You apparently enjoy lashing out with your fists. You just used that frog as an excuse."

Perhaps I should have mentioned sooner that there was a woman on board. A slim and attractive girl with coppery hair named Sylvia Varner was visiting us for five days consecutively. But she had come out on the crew-shift cruiser *Aquila* which was berthed right alongside of us on the semi-molten crust.

Women are out of place on Mercury run ships, and if I were taking fictional liberties with this record I'd leave her out. But facts are facts, and the feminine zig-zag had a lot to do with the way the frog brought us all to the brink of despair. Without her it would have been less though, but less exciting, too, and, of course, for romantic reasons I was glad she had come. She happened to be Ellison's niece, and my fiancée, and had a kid

brother working on the metallurgical staff.

"But it isn't a frog," I said, irritably. "It's a Mercurian animal. And I don't blame Murphy for sailing into me."

"You're being very charitable," she said. "He tried to kill you."

"All right," I said. "For a minute he went berserk. But what would you do if you bagged the first Mercurian animal ever seen and a dumb kid turned it into a museum piece? If Murphy could have brought that frog back to Earth alive the National Geographic Society would have smothered him with medals."

"But won't it thaw out, Dave?"

"It's limper than a rag right now," I said. "But it is also dead as a doornail."

Sylvia's brow crinkled. "I should think a Mercurian animal would have to be plated like an armadillo. I should think it would need some sort of air-cooling system and a—"

"Hold on," I said. "You're jumping to a priori conclusions. We'll start with the animal. It is froglike, so conditions on Mercury must favor the development of slender, agile quadrupeds with powerful hindlimbs. Since Mercury is flecked with semi-molten 'marsh patches' its froglike appearance does not surprise me. We can only speculate as to its habits, but it's probably oviparous, and has a brief life-cycle."

"Now, in hot baths with carefully regulated approaches human beings have been able to stand degrees of heat above the boiling point of water. Back in the eighteenth century a Frenchman named Chamouni the Incombustible entered an oven containing a raw leg of mutton, and remained there until the meat was completely cooked. Medical history records hundreds of similar cases."

"But what has that to do with Murphy's frog?"

"Don't you see? If human beings can build up all that resistance in a few minutes what's to stop a *rapidly breeding* Mercurian animal from acquiring ten times as much immunity in fifty thousand generations? With already immune invertebrates to start with natural selection could give even a highly evolved, meaty-fleshed animal plenty of resistance."

I was feeling distinctly proud of myself when Sylvia countered with: "You said

the sides of its body and its hindlimbs were covered with fine, reddish hairs. Villosities was the term you used. How could natural selection build up immunity in hair?"

I could have brought up another player, but I wanted her to smooth my forehead instead. So I leaned back with a sigh and refrained from pointing out that chitin was slow-burning at best, and that the only hairy frog on Earth—*Trichobatrachus robustus* from West Africa—lived up to its name.

She sat on the arm of my chair and leaned forward and for a minute I thought I was going to get my wish. But all she did was kiss me. She leaned her lips against mine and for about three minutes a pleasant tingling surged through me. Then I began to grow restless. I couldn't breathe and her lips were no longer warm and vibrant.

I had to move her face to one side in order to inhale, and the instant I did so she swayed and her elbows descended on my chest.

A CHILL coursed through me. Her arms were rigid and she seemed almost weightless. Alarmed, I rose, grasped her wrists and eased her gently down into the chair.

She just sat there staring up at me, her face a petrified mask and her body so utterly still that it did something to sound. In place of the faint susurrous which occupied space gives forth the chair seemed to be enveloped in a kind of auditory vacuum which chilled me to the core of my being.

I can't remember how long I stood there with horror slapping at my brain like the tides of some cold, dead moon. I only know that I turned at last and went stumbling from her presence with one thought uppermost in my mind.

I must get medical aid to her quickly, before that trance could deepen, before it could endanger her life.

Going up in the jacket-lift to the sick bay I kept visualizing Ned Dawson's face. Dawson was a strong-jawed, competent physician with years of experience behind him and I was sure he would know what to do.

He was usually in the sick bay attending

to the many little sprains and bruises the men brought in with them from the crust. There was a flicker of violet light as the jacket-lift hummed to a stop. I stepped out and raced down a cold-lighted passageway to the "drug shop," my breath coming fast.

On meta-glass chairs amidst a faint odor of antiseptics two men sat frozen, but I thought they were asleep. I went straight through the waiting space with scarcely a glance at them, and burst into the sick bay unannounced.

Dawson was there all right, but he was bent nearly double, frozen in the act of applying a gauge bandage to the badly cut ankle of a miner who stood contemplating his navel like a schizophrenic, his head sunken on his chest.

FOR an instant I just stood there gasping, too stunned to realize that I was staring at a physician who could no longer heal. It wasn't until I went up to him and discovered that his body was cold and his face a frozen mask that my brain started to soak up horror.

I went reeling out into the passageway like a drunken man and tried to locate the commander, and found him at last in the control room with his body glinting in light-silvered dust.

He was standing before one of the *Lyra's* translucent windows staring out upon the steamy Mercurian landscape, his arms folded on his chest. When I touched him he swayed and when I looked into his eyes I perceived that the pupils were set in a fixed stare, and covered with a dull, grayish film.

Murphy was standing beside him. The Irishman had evidently come in for orders and stiffened to immobility with a pipe in his mouth and a slightly provoked look on his face, as though my stupidity still riled him.

A nightmare unreality lengthened the minutes which followed into unevenly-spaced eternities filled with a steadily mounting dread. In the more crowded parts of the ship frozen men clustered in little queues. Every member of the atomotor crew stood frozen at his post. The starboard watch looked like statues carved in bronze and in the chain locker room were three crewmen whose muscular con-

tortions conveyed an illusion of motion as they tugged at windlasses which had ceased to turn.

My palms were wet and I was trembling in every limb when I completed my inspection of the ship. It was especially bad going back in the jacket-lift to the commander's cabin. In the dark fore-hold I had glimpsed obscure, rigid shadows which had unnerved me more than all the frozen, brittle men illumined by cold light in the crew spaces fore and aft.

When I stepped from the jacket-lift a voice said: "They only *seem* brittle, Rowley. Actually they are still soft and flabby, like all the inhabitants of the third planet."

It was a telepathic voice, but I didn't know that. I thought it was a human voice speaking close to my ear. Appalled, I swung about.

The frog was peering around a bend in the passageway, its stalked eyes pointing toward the lift. I fought a desire to scream as it leapt agilely toward me. It seemed to be grinning up at me. Its wet, yellowish lips were split in a grimace which gave it the appearance of being convulsed with mirth.

"Why are you trembling, Rowley?" it said. "Surely you expected to find intelligent life on at least *one* of the planets."

"You mean you are—"

"Intelligent, yes. So intelligent that you seem very primitive to us. It is a hindrance, in a way. Too wide a gulf."

"Then you did this," I choked. "You—you froze every man on this ship."

"Froze? Oh, I see what you mean. It is unfortunate that I am compelled to use your mental concepts to think with. You are giving my thoughts a verbal twist peculiar to yourself. You see, Rowley, I can correlate your fugitive reactions to a given phenomenon with everything experienced by you from the day of your birth. By simply tuning in on your thoughts I can get your—your slant. Not merely your thought images, Rowley, but all the little twists and turns of your familiar speech. Fortunately you have telepathic powers, too. Somewhat rudimentary, but adequate.

The frog's eyes quivered. "Don't glare at me, Rowley. I have no intention of harming you."

"You harmed *her*," I groaned.

"I harmed— Oh, I see. The girl, eh? We propagate by fission, so we've been spared all that. I didn't harm her, Rawley. All I did was diminish her mass. I had to do that to warm myself.

"Rawley, I was almost gone. I can stand a little cold, but that liquid air—"

"You did *what* to her?"

"Diminished her mass. Now keep your shirt on, Rawley. I need the glow to warm me. Needed it badly. For real warmth there's nothing like the radiant energies imprisoned in kalium. The bodies of terrestrials are ideal sources of heat in all respects; not only because they contain kalium, but because the other elements of which they are composed are among the easiest to tap.

"No harm done, you understand. I can radiate back subatomic particles at any time. All I did was squeeze out the radiations in a soft, glutinous mass. You don't have to bombard atoms or surround them with water-jackets to strip them, Rawley. With a little patience you can squeeze out their energies the way you squeeze toothpaste from a tube.

"My body has soaked up a fine, tingling warmth from all those frozen terrestrials. They are mere atomic husks now, but perfectly preserved and restorable at any time."

I scarcely heard it. Something was happening to the ship. Beneath my feet the deck was unmistakably swaying, and there were twangings and creakings all along the passageway which could only mean one thing.

The ship was in motion!

**T**HE frog had noticed it, too. It stiffened abruptly and cocked its head as though listening, its stalked eyes squinting shut.

In paralyzed astonishment I stood staring at the vibrating overhead, wondering what in hell it could mean. Had one of the frozen crewmen regained the use of his limbs and attempted an emergency take-off? I strained my ears, but could detect no atomotor drone, or other indication that we were rocketing upward from the crust.

"No, Rawley," the frog's voice came again, vibrant but strained. "No, we are not leaving the planet. I think I know

what is happening. Rawley, you have an instrument which enables you to see the ship as though it were being viewed from a distance by someone out on the planet. Horiz—horizonscope. Suppose we see for ourselves."

We descended in the jacket-lift together, the frog bracing its knees precisely as the commander had done long ago in another world.

I don't know how I lived through the next ten minutes. When I stood in the control room and looked in the horizonscope I saw a sight which I shall never forget if I live to be a hundred.

On both sides of the ship were dozens of frog-like shapes moving in single file, their bodies bent nearly double as though they were straining at the leash.

All about them swirled steamy vapors and flickering tongues of flame. A blood-red sun, so gigantic that it spanned a fifth of the sky, hung like a vast, glowing eye directly overhead, dazzling my pupils as I stared. Even in the horizonscope it seemed huge, blinding.

The scent was weird beyond all imagining—weird and unutterably terrifying.

"Rawley, they are moving the ship. They are using magnetic tow lines and making a mighty good job of it."

"Where—where are they taking us?" I gasped.

The frog's reply was utterly bewildering. "We'll label it terrestrial fauna—habitat group. We'll take the ship right into the museum. Large-brained bipeds from the third planet, stooping above their artifacts in perfectly natural attitudes. Magnificent.

"Mustn't let sunlight touch them. It's curious I didn't think of this when I absorbed their energies. My one thought was to warm myself, but necessity is the mother of invention. They'll honor me for this. I'll head the next expedition. My instructions were imbecilic. 'Observe all their habits and then mummify them.'

"What good are shriveled specimens? So long as sunlight doesn't touch them they'll keep this way for a thousand years. This one has been—helpful. Oh, enormously. Just as well I didn't tap him.

"I mustn't let him suspect that I couldn't—can't. I've absorbed too much radiance as it is. My energies are brimming over.



He thinks I can still diminish his mass. Might have to kill him if he knew.

"Kill him. I could do that, of course. But I'd hate to lose one of these specimens."

It hit me all at once, with the force of a physical blow. There was something that the frog didn't know. It didn't know that I could listen in on its private thoughts. It thought it could shut off its mind from me. Hitting me also with force was the sudden realization that when in close proximity to it I had telepathic powers which were first rate, as good as its own.

Wait a minute—better. Because it didn't seem aware of what I was thinking now. So we were just animals to it, eh? Big-brained bipeds—*specimens*. I was edging away from it and toward the control panel, very cautiously.

KEEPING my excitement down wasn't easy. There was a lot of anger mixed up with it, and more fear than a man of courage likes to own up to. I wondered how strong the magnetic tow lines were. Would they hold the ship if I blasted out all the rocket jets and started the atomotors ten seconds later?

It didn't seem likely. If I could reach the control panel nine-tenths of the battle would be won. Nearer to it I inched, and nearer.

The frog stirred just as my hand touched the rocket control. I swung down on it hard. Something in my brain started babbling as I swung my other hand toward the atomotor emergency bulb and splattered it with my naked palm.

The whole ship seemed to explode, carrying the top of my skull with it. I was no longer in a Mercury run spaceship screaming defiance at a frog.

I was far out in space between massive gaseous suns, red and blue and mottled, with island universes to right and left of me and a long-tailed comet sweeping down from a ragged hole on the sky.

When I crawled through the fence into my own backyard again I was bruised and partly numb, but the ship was plowing steadily through the void, and Mercury was so far away from it that it was a mere fly-speck mottling on the dull-corona-encircled disk of the sun.

The frog? Yes, it was still with us, but all the cockiness had gone out of it. It came to me, as meek as a lamb, and laid all its cards on the table.

It would be the specimen now. So long as we didn't cast it out through the airlocks to freeze in the void it would consent to be exhibited in every museum on Earth. Only the museums would have to be roofless, because it would need the sunlight.

It promised not to diminish the mass of a single human being on Earth. All it needed was our sunlight. Locked up in the *Lyra* and freezing to death it had been compelled to tap the nearest energy source, which happened to be us.

But on Earth it would tap the sunlight. It pointed out that the sunlight falling on one square foot of Earth would keep one of our big power plants running for a year, if we knew as much as the Mercurians did about radiant heat.

"I'll be no trouble at all, Rawley. And if you wish, I'll show you how to convert sunlight into useful energy. You won't need so many cyclotrons then. Before I'd monkey with anything as unpredictable as a skinless atom I'd go jump in a lake."

I was no longer listening. There was something I had left unfinished and it suddenly seemed more important to me than anything a frog could say or do.

Going down in the jacket-lift to Sylvia I kept trying to recall just how I felt when it had cheated me out of something I was entitled to.

It didn't seem right to leave a kiss dangling in midair, and I was sure that Sylvia was feeling frustrated, too.

She was. She came into my arms in utter silence, and we did the kiss up brown, and stored it away in our memories for when we were eighty-eight.

"Darling," she said. "I'm glad we thought of that."

I felt better almost at once. They had sent me out from Earth with a pat on the back and a commission, and I was returning with the commander's niece in my arms and a story in my brain which the news syndicates would certainly want.

I'd ask a good price for it. Lunar honcymoons were expensive, and although Sylvia wasn't extravagant she liked orchids as well as the next girl and was just the right height to wear sables with grace.





# Espionage in Space

by

**ALAN CONNELL**

*Illustration by Lynch*

# Espionage in Space

By ALAN CONNELL

**The black armadas of Pluto were massing for battle. And Earth spun her unwarned, unsuspecting way; duped by a lovely Mata Hari of the Dark Planet.**

**B**ENEATH Ransome yawned the black pits of the outer courtyards. He shivered in the icy winds, and his breath, already accelerated by the thinness of Pluto's atmosphere, came in desperate gulps as he darted along the narrow top of a connecting wall. He knew that if he was detected in these suspicious circumstances, his disguise would soon be penetrated; and death—the penalty for espionage on most planets of the System—would be his reward.

Ahead of him loomed the vast bulge of the palace-center of Tragarath, Emperor and god of all Pluto. Ransome paused in a sheltered corner and took a parchment from his belt. He studied the complicated drawing carefully. Already he knew it by heart, but he could not take a chance.

Arnold Ransome, Kra-55 of Spacial Espionage Service, turned the pencil beam on his own body, examining it microscopically from chest to feet. Over his own powerful muscles he wore a smooth, tight-fitting artificial skin, jet black in color and porous to permit the true skin to breathe. The disguise was of vital importance, for to aliens Ythrald was a forbidden city.

Satisfied with his inspection, he adjusted the high collar about his neck. This feature of the Plutonian costume hid all except the upper half of his face and his shaven skull.

From his belt he uncoiled a length of fine but incredibly strong wire, spaced with half a dozen metal pegs. He tossed an end of the wire upward and twin hooks caught on the lower stonework of the window. He climbed swiftly upward and clung outside the window, inspecting the interior.

Soundlessly he slid the window aside and stepped into the room. A Plutonian, engaged in adjusting his collar before a long mirror, turned and inspected Ransome with glittering green eyes.

"I did not hear you enter," he said. "You are late."

Ransome's own eyes stared back from behind their tiny shields of green glass, and his voice intoned the hoarse syllables.

"We are both late," he said peremptorily.

"True," the other agreed. "Come."

The two black, statuesque figures, naked except for belted kirtles and flaring collars, passed the guards of the inner doorway and paused on the rim of the hall.

Amber lights flickered on the ceiling, illuminating with fantastic radiance the concourse of Councillors and Overlords where they reclined on cushioned blocks.

"There are two vacant places over there," said Ransome's companion.

As he sank into the cushions Kra-55's gaze went instantly to the central dais at the heart of the semi-circles of blocks. There lay Tragarath, Emperor of the city-state Ythrald and all the dependent city-states of Pluto, traditionally descended directly from the world-creating gods of the dawn ages. Physically he was not imposing, being emaciated and possessing even less of nose and chin than was characteristic of Plutonians; but his eyes were large and piercing, restless and glittering, as compelling as hypnotic mirrors. At his side lay his daughter Allegra, whose figure conformed closely to Earthly standards but whose face was utterly repulsive.

Tragarath's eyes roamed back and forth across the gathering. "Most of you know why you are here," he declared in high-pitched tones. "Another hour is at hand, another day, another dawn. Earth is the ycran-beast of the System. Once she repulsed our forces, inflicting hardship and destruction on us under the name of reprisal. Now the ycran-beast will face a force renewed, replenished, amplified, strengthened, irresistible. This time she will crumble before us, be ground to dust over which our victorious feet shall pass.

That much I tell you immediately, Councillors: that the waiting is over—this time we take Earth for ourselves."

KRA-55'S eyes hardened. S.E.S. had sent him here to confirm just such a suspicion: that a Second War was about to be launched from Pluto. This news would not cause much surprise on Earth; more important was the need to know what form the Plutonian offensive would take.

An elderly Councillor, whom Ransome recognized as Orchen—at one time an ambassador on Earth—rose from his block.

"Tragarath," Orchen said slowly, "this is madness. How often have I told you of the futility of it? Twenty years ago, against the better judgment of many, you attacked Earth. What did it bring you? Death for thousands of our warriors, destruction to vast areas of our property, degradation to all."

Tragarath's eyes blazed. "Degradation? How dare you use that word before one who is a god? Do not try my patience too far!"

Orchen shook his head sadly. "If you proceed with this new war, you will bring more misery on your people. Earth is even more heavily armed than before, and help may come to her from Mars and Venus if your ships enter the Inner Circle. You cannot conquer Earth!"

"Silence, Councillor!" cried Allegra. "My father has spoken and none may dispute him."

"Earth will pay for her arrogance," Tragarath continued, "for the injuries she inflicted on us, for the deaths of our warriors in the First War. We are ready again. Earth will be ours. The divine race of Pluto must be free to expand. Shackles of compression must be thrown off!"

Intense disgust was written on Orchen's face. This talk of racial divinity, while adequate for deluding and inspiring the masses, was ill-fitted to such a scientific and intellectual gathering. More than ever was Orchen convinced that Tragarath was crazed by his ambitions and that Allegra had been blinded by her father's visions of universal power and worship.

"I must ask," he said stubbornly, "that

the plan be abandoned and other methods of expansion be sought."

"Traitor!" Tragarath said hysterically. "You are expelled from the hall. Go!"

Orchen strode to the doorway. "I leave with regret," he said. "The destruction of the first piece of Earth property will precipitate reprisals that can only end in Pluto's doom—for Earth cannot be expected to forgive a second time."

"Go!" screamed Tragarath. "Go before I order your banishment!"

The Emperor settled back in his cushions, eyes burning in his black skull. "I have a plan," he stated, "by which Earth will not be able to counter our attack. The last of our battle units are being completed, and as each is ready for service it will proceed to Europa. From there—"

Kra-55's keen eyes detected a signal pass from Allegra to the Emperor. Tragarath stopped speaking while his daughter leaned forward to whisper to him.

Allegra turned to the assembly. "Before revealing the method and time of attack," she said, "we will hold a second check and count of those present in the room. Earth is known to have developed its espionage system to a high degree. We cannot take the chance that some carefully disguised spy has found his way among us."

A whisper of indignation went up from the Councillors.

"We were checked and identified before entering the palace," one declared.

"A second check will be made," Allegra decreed coldly.

Ransome's veins were like conduits of ice. His mind raced. Seconds remained before discovery. A count of the Councillors, a check of those who should be present or absent, an inspection of features or identification papers—any of these would soon expose him as a spy. And he was not in doubt as to the swift fate that would greet him.

From a hidden compartment of his belt he drew a tiny needle and plunger. He leaned toward the Plutonian who had accompanied him into the hall.

"Listen, friend," he said confidentially.

The man came closer to hear what he had to say.

Ransome pressed the needle into the black skin, drove down the plunger until



the tiny compartment was empty of the powerful narcotic.

A dazed expression passed over the Plutonian's face as the fluid entered his blood stream. He swayed, collapsed down his supporting elbow and rolled from the couch.

Ransome sprang to his feet. "He has fainted!" he cried.

Confusion swept over the hall. Several dozen Councillors darted forward to help the stricken man. For a time the Emperor and his daughter were forgotten as men crowded about Ransome and his victim.

"Air!" Ransome cried. "Stand aside while I carry him outside."

Assisted by several of the Councillors, he bore the rigid body from the hall, through the outer rooms and on to an exposed balcony. Here the shadows were deep, and little attention was paid to Ransome as he drew back from the circle, gradually merging his body with the darkness.

He laughed quietly, sprang agilely to an ornamental scroll that adorned the side wall, swung himself upward and in a moment had vanished.

ON Earth Ransome was sometimes known in the Service as The Cat. The name was well given. As sleek and graceful as a cat he was now as, clad in the artificial skin that revealed every muscle and sinew, he sped lightly over the roofs and walls and ramparts of the Plutonian metropolis. His padded shoes made no sound as they contacted the stonework, and despite the all-enveloping gloom he seemed to sense instinctively when to leap, when to climb and when to slide downward into the dark cavities of the courtyards. This agility was part of the training of those who entered S.E.S., but Kra-55 had brought it to a peak attained by few others. No soul in that vast city knew that an Earthman traversed the four miles from the palace to the outer wall.

He paused now in the shadow of the city-encircling wall. Again he brought into play the device of hooks and wire and ascended thus to the summit. Lying flat lest watchful eyes should be turned his belt two discs, which he strapped to the palms of his hands. Thus equipped, that way, he took from another section of

he lowered himself over the edge of the wall, and held up by the Service's friction discs, slid slowly and easily down the hundred foot face of that man-made cliff.

Presently he was running swiftly over the unstable soil of the plains outside the city. A bright star shone in the sky above him. That was the sun, the central star whose mighty bands of gravitation leashed this remote planet in a vast, wavering orbit. The heat it shed on Pluto was negligible, but Kra-55 sweated profusely, for internal fires in the heart of the planet penetrated to and warmed even the lower atmospheric layers.

He glanced back. Ythrald the stone metropolis, built, as were all the city-states, in one of the more stable areas of the volcanic planet, bulked immense against the everlasting starlight. He turned his face forward again. Ahead he could dimly discern the place where his camouflaged cruiser lay; and despite his long inurement to danger, he felt a glow of relief in his chest.

Two minutes later he was shedding the artificial black hide from his own tanned body and turning his attention to the cruiser's controls. In free space, just beyond the last tenuous atmospheric belt, he put a direct beam on Earth and transmitted the information that he would deliver personally twenty days later to S.E.S. headquarters.

GREGORI LOCKE, chief of Spacial Espionage Service, opened a slide in a cabinet of his office, revealing a glass plate. He beckoned to Ransome and together, by transmitted image, they viewed the interior of the Service's laboratory, situated in another quarter of the building.

Blue-white lights illuminated ten thousand square yards of tiled floor and chrome-plated instruments. Accompanied by two guards, uniformed in the night-black of the Service, a girl entered through one of the doorways. She was dark-haired and of heroic build that hinted of physical powers and mental capabilities beyond the ordinary need. An expression of distaste formed on her lips as she viewed the laboratory, but her features remained immobile.

A laboratory assistant hurried forward and spoke to her. She nodded resignedly



and they moved forward to a bank of instruments. A row of technicians took up their places before a board strewn with dials and switches. Cards filled with information were passed to them and they began to tap keys and adjust pointers.

The girl took her place on a dais and inserted her arms, as far as the shoulders, into long glass cylinders, where they lay pallid and motionless in the blue radiance.

A dazzling phosphorescence engulfed the cylinders, a searing brilliance from which the girl's only protection was a facial shield. Instantly rows of lights began to drift in complicated patterns above the technicians. Across the surfaces of grey screens wavering lines formed, shimmered and halted. Others moved across them, overlapping, merging, and ultimately synchronizing.

The light beating on the girl's glass-encased arms changed to a dull crimson. The technicians tapped at a fresh set of keys, shuffled cards swiftly in their alert hands, and depressed another set of switches. Behind them a master technician moved along the platform, tabulating results on a slate.

A hundred square yards of the laboratory were now alive with purring machines and winking lights, and a multitude of tests and analyses streamed to the technicians. A dozen patterns moved across the screens, were matched and passed on.

Five minutes later the last light had died out, the technicians had discarded the last card, and the master technician had checked the final line on his slate.

Gregori Locke closed the shutter of the viewing screen and returned to his desk. "Rejecting the aspects that can readily be faked," he said, "that is the completest identification test that the Service can devise. I know my own operatives, or think I do; but the senses of sight and hearing can be deceived, whereas those technicians, testing by machinery, can't be victimized."

A chute opened and the master technician's card fell on the desk. Locke picked it up.

"Operative Ecka-39 has been properly identified," he said. "Identification 98%. Full percentage is impossible because of the slight physical changes that occur in

the human body from time to time. You see, we check by the operative's arms—skin markings and imperfections, the whorls of all ten fingers, the lines of the palms, the vein and muscle formation and location, hair growth, bone structure, nail patterns and a full half dozen other features. It would be impossible for a stranger's arms to check more than 3% with the operatives' cards in our possession."

"I've had sufficient check-ups to know that," Ransome said with a smile.

Locke nodded. "And now to our serious business. Since we received your beam message from Pluto and during the seven days you have been on Earth, war forces have mobilized. Most of the patrolling fleet has been recalled and the production of new units speeded up. I must say the War Department has co-operated with me well in this instance, but now they're clamouring for more information. Your report that Tragarath has a plan is worrying the Department; they suspect all sorts of things from invisible attacks to new and deadly armaments. I suppose you received no hint of that 'plan'?"

"None. I left too abruptly."

"It's the duty of S.E.S. to get the information somehow, because the Department can't start an offensive until Tragarath makes the first move. I'm sending you to Europa immediately, Ransome, to learn the nature and time of the Emperor's attack. You'll need assistance, so I've sent for one whose knowledge of beam transmission and general intelligence quota will be of utmost value to you. In brief, I refer to Jetta Gondila."

"Jetta Gondila!" Ransome breathed.

**K**KNOWN in the records of S.E.S. as Ecka-39, Gondila was Earth's most famous female spy. Like so many of his co-workers, she had previously been only a name to Ransome; but he knew of her amazing record of service, and forgetting his own eminence and achievements, he could not suppress a surge of excitement at the prospect of meeting and working with so distinguished an operative.

The door opened quietly. The Service guards stood aside courteously to admit the girl, then departed. Jetta Gondila

moved across to the desk, slim body bending gracefully.

Gregori Locke shook hands with her. "Please excuse the identification," he apologized. "But you know it's a necessary and emphatic rule that identification must be made each and every time that I communicate with an operative."

"I'm accustomed to it now," the girl said. "Please lower the lights." She dropped a couple of books in her lap as she sank back into a chair wearily. "I've been studying the records of the First War and the print has strained my eyes."

"Then you knew that I sent for you in connection with the Plutonian uprising?"

Jetta's immobile features relaxed in a faint smile.

"I should be a poor operative, Captain Locke, if I didn't know what my own chief had in mind."

The men laughed cordially and Locke introduced Ransome.

"I'm honored," the girl said quietly. "Your record is unexcelled."

Ransome's protests were curtailed by Gregori Locke's emphatic tones. The three sat back for a formal discussion of the impending war. Points of the First War were considered, and old reports from S.E.S. operatives still on Pluto were read.

"There's nothing new here," Locke said, tapping the sheets. "If Tragarath has some super armament, he has kept it well hidden."

"Is there any prospect of help from Venus if we need it?" Jetta asked.

"None. Relations are too strained. Venus won't take sides. Only yesterday her ambassador characterized us as 'a bloody, warring people.'"

"From Mars?"

"I think not. The Martian Overlords are annoyed because Earth insisted on a priority claim over the radioactive ores on Mercury."

"Then we stand alone?"

"I'm afraid so. If Tragarath's confidence is not hopelessly misplaced, the fate of Earth may rest on what you two can discover on Europa."

THE three-hundred foot cruiser blazed an embered trail out across the orbital lanes, seeking to intercept Jupiter, the racing colossus of the Outer Circle.

Quartered in the nose cabins of the mechrome hull, Ransome and Jetta Gondila saw much of each other. Jetta abandoned a preliminary tendency to hold herself aloof and engaged freely in conversation. The two exchanged stories of their exploits, and though they did not consciously set out to boast, the feats they told of capped all fictional tales in peaks of daring and adventure. Jetta told of a penetration of the citadels of the Martian Overlords at the command of S.E.S. Ransome outlined his experiences on the asteroid fortress of the outlaws, where he uncovered the weaknesses that enabled the Earth fleet to blast the fortress into incandescence. Jetta recalled a ninety-hour vigil in the subterranean depths of the Drifting Plains, where the Venusian diplomats held their secret conclaves. Ransome related the discomforts of the week he spent in a tiny aerated chamber in the heart of a synthetic robot that simulated the monstrous shapes of the Jovian rulers.

Time passed swiftly and pleasantly during the recounting of these exploits, and it was with reluctance that Ransome beheld the glowing sphere of Jupiter swim ever larger out of the walls of blackness.

The atomic blast, already decreased to a negligible glow, was completely cut off; and the cruiser approached soundlessly and invisibly into the orbit of Europa.

"The Plutonian forces should be here already," Ransome declared. "Their ships may be distributed over the surface of the satellite or, more probably, grouped about a central fortress waiting for the last units to arrive."

His skilled hands wandered over the controls and set the cruiser in a retrograde path about the orbit. Soon Europa emerged from behind the shining bulk of Jupiter and raced in a glorious arc to meet the tiny ship. Again Ransome put the cruiser through a complicated set of maneuvers that dropped it into the thin belt of atmosphere that cloaked the rocky surface and gave it a circling velocity high above the bleak landscape.

Together he and Jetta inspected the ground below. A scrutiny of the entire equatorial strip revealed nothing, and they were compelled to move north and circle again. This time they were rewarded by

a fleeting glimpse of a nest of pale lights at the base of a rocky range.

"The ships and the fortress!" Jetta cried.

Ransome lowered the ship to within twenty feet of the surface, for should Plutonian eyes be turned their way and notice the thin stream of their tube discharge, swift disaster would overtake their expedition. Curtained by the towering ramparts of the range, the cruiser slipped lower until it settled on a level plateau and compressed air braked the extended wheels to a standstill.

A faint sunlight, no more intense than reflected from a full moon on Earth, illuminated the scene. Jupiter was invisible, and strange patterns of stars pitted the sky. The territory was of the dominating rock, with here and there a pale vegetation expanding from patches of crushed pumice.

A faint wind keened across the hull, whispering of desolation and loneliness, for no intelligent life inhabited this globe.

Ransome stared into the gulfs of shadow, seeking landmarks that he had noted from the air.

"That ravine over there," he said, "will take me through the range and directly above the fortress. What light there is will be gone completely in another two hours and I should have no trouble entering secretly."

"You are going alone?"

"Your work is here."

Jetta nodded.

Ransome retired to his cabin and donned the artificial skin and other items of his disguise. Back in the control room he subjected himself to a close inspection, so that no wrinkles or tears would reveal the nature of his covering. Finally he donned the high collar and the fur cloak of the Plutonian expeditionary forces. Beneath the cloak he strapped a tiny transmitter.

He paused at the air-lock, sniffing the rust-tainted atmosphere, then he sprang down and darted nimbly across the splintered terrain.

The Cat was abroad again!

The gorges sprang open before his leaping passage; slices of starlight vanished and re-opened above him. His passage was unimpeded by the uneven surface:

he took ravines in his stride, outcroppings served as platforms for high leaps to other boulders. His nimble feet did not fail him: his eyes were attuned to select the level surfaces and his muscles obeyed all signals implicitly.

Despite the exertion that sent the blood racing through his veins, the bitter cold began to chill his bones. He switched on the tiny heating unit, and instantly an aura of warmth encircled him. His head ached from the effects of the tainted atmosphere that he drew into his lungs, but he did not regret not using a helmet and covering, for progress in space suits was cumbersome and slow.

Steadily he sped through the mountain-piercing gorge, a wraith fleeing through a shattered world. The sensitive prongs of rock-clinging plants stirred faintly in the wake of his passage, vaguely detecting him, yet finally deceived by his speed and silence. Dark caverns and shadowed hollows streamed by him, but he had no fear of what they might hold, for exploration and survey of Europa had long ago proven that it was empty of any high or inimical form of life. The worst he could expect was a fall and a broken limb, but he had sufficient confidence in his eyesight and agility to dismiss that possibility.

An hour later he emerged from the gorge.

Below him shone the lights of the Plutian encampment!

A GLEAMING array of cruisers lay on a level space, light reflected dimly from their curving backs. They were gathered in squadrons of a hundred each, and far out on the plain were squadrons as yet incomplete. Ransome calculated that another three hundred incoming ships would complete Tragarath's armada. Fifty squadrons awaiting the Emperor's word! Five thousand heavily armed flying fortresses! It was the duty of S.E.S. to see that those ships did not drive into the atmosphere of Earth!

In the shadow of the cliff-like range was an officers' encampment, a series of metal domes clustered about a direct-beam transmitting station, which also served as a central fortress.

Kra-55 descended from his high perch

with feline grace. Slowly he trod toward the encampment, confident that his black attire would hide him from watchful eyes.

A hundred yards from the first hut he paused, a sixth sense apparently warning him of danger. He hovered on the spot, for a moment unsure of himself. Then a smile crossed his features and he stepped forward to inspect the ground ahead. He knew now what had caused him to hesitate. Set in the rock surface and imitating its color was a forty-foot wide strip of metal that threw off a dull gleam only perceptible to the keenest eyes. The strip curved completely about the encampment, and Kra-55 was not long in doubt as to its purpose.

It was an alarm signal to trap intruders, a sensitized ribbon of metal that would transmit an instantaneous warning if an uninsulated foot touched it!

Kra-55 strode back a hundred paces, ran and sprang.

He knew the chance he took. Should he fall short, death would erupt from the domed huts, a thousand warriors would close about him.

The metal surface streamed beneath him. His heart stood still. Had he overestimated the power of his muscles under decreased gravitation?

His foot touched rock beyond the alarm strip. A convulsion of his muscles threw his upper body forward. He went down on his knees, stood erect in the Plutonian encampment!

He adjusted his cloak and strode forward. A hut loomed before him, and from within he heard the sound of voices. He did not pause to listen, for the inflections told him that the matters under discussion had little to do with planetary conquest and more to do with the conquest of women.

The transmitting station was his goal. There, he guessed, would gather the most important officers. There would be exchanged vital messages, cryptic sentences.

A Plutonian emerged from the dimly-lighted interior of a hut. He approached Ransome, gave the clawed finger salute, made as though to pass, then paused.

Blood pumped feverishly to Ransome's pulses. He switched off his heating unit. Plutonians, inured to cold, used no arti-

ficial warming devices, and the presence of one on Ransome's body would be sure to arouse suspicion if it were noted.

"Duties!" said the Plutonian conversationally. "I was hoping for a few hours' sleep, but of course something turned up for me to do. Ten units are coming in later and I have to assign them to their squadrons. . . ." He peered closer at Ransome's face. "I don't recognize you. . . . Well, they're coming in so fast I can't expect to know everybody. I hope you have better luck with your sleep periods than I do. Duties!"

Still grumbling he headed outwards toward the alarm ribbon.

Presently Ransome stood before the beam station. A steady stream of Plutonians passed in and out the doorway, some bearing papers, some muttering indignantly of interrupted sleep.

Kra-55 joined the ingoing stream. His eyes searched ahead. To his relief he perceived that no one was challenged.

The main body of Plutonians passed into the central transmitting room, but several broke the line to enter side corridors. At the first opportunity Kra-55 stepped into a deserted passageway. Behind the doors that lined the metal walls were quartered officers of the fleet. Kra-55 knew that he could not expect to invade the transmitting room unchallenged, but here he might go unnoticed for hours.

AS he patrolled the corridor he pressed his ear against the doors, senses keened for vital words that would give him a clue to the information he sought. Behind most doors he heard the heavy breathing of sleepers and sometimes the sound of men eating. Scraps of conversation came to him, but all valueless until good fortune caused him to halt outside a room at the far end of the corridor. Two men were talking.

"... shells are ready. He told me. They're already moving toward the Inner Circle."

"What are they for? They can't do any damage."

"It's supposed to be a secret plan, but anybody who has seen the shells can guess what they're for. The Emperor ordered the construction of three thousand shells of thin metal. They resemble

space-ships at a distance, but of course there are no men or armaments available to man them, so they're completely empty except for radio control units. Three thousand empty shells, and one cruiser to guide the whole of that number by radio remote control. They're already moving slowly toward the Inner Circle. Earth's telescopes and outposts will think it's our armada approaching and send their entire fleet to intercept them. Meanwhile we'll be leaving tomorrow with the fifty squadrons. Full speed will take us out of the Ecliptic-plane. We'll be almost in Earth's atmosphere before we're noticed. With the Earth fleet hopelessly out of reach we'll have the planet at our mercy. When the fleet discovers its error and returns, we'll be in possession of the planet and the ships will have to hold off for fear of destroying their own people."

"It sounds all right—if it works. I can't help thinking that we need more than strategy to subjugate Earth people for any length of time. I was in the First War. I know what they're like."

"It's just as well the Emperor can't hear those remarks. It's well to keep such pessimistic ideas to yourself."

As the hoarse syllables ceased, Kra-55 slipped away, joined the outgoing line and moved away from the transmitting station. In the deeper shadows he linked up the batteries of his tiny direct-beam broadcaster. The invisible beam drove out, searching through the night in the direction where the hidden cruiser lay. Presently the clicking of the intake speaker told of contact and synchronization.

Jetta Gondila's voice, faint and remote, echoed in his ears: "Here, Ransome. Have you got it?"

Carefully and accurately he transmitted what he had learned, then listened while she read back what he had sent.

"Correct."

"Are you coming back now?"

"Coming."

He unfastened the complete transmitter from his body, severing all communication with Eck-a-39. He lifted a large boulder, dropped the apparatus into the opening and replaced the stone. There the transmitter might lie undiscovered until the end of time.

As he approached the alarm ribbon, he almost collided with a group of Plutonians who emerged unexpectedly from the pervading gloom. He stepped aside for them to pass, which they did with words of greeting.

"Wait!"

Every nerve in Kra-55's body tensed. His muscles seemed to be robbed of all activity.

THE officers had returned to his side. One of them stood at his elbow, staring into his face. Before Ransome could make a move to forestall it, his cloak was snatched aside, revealing the heating unit, which was functioning again.

"A heater!" cried the officer. "I thought I felt it as I passed!"

A cry went up like a death-signal: "Earthman! Spy!"

A jostling throng surrounded Ransome. He would have died there and then if there had been sufficient room for any officer to turn a weapon on him; but by their very numbers the Plutonians defeated their own purpose.

"Spy!"

Kra-55 struck right and left and two of the black-skins went down before his closed fists. His cloak was ripped from him.

Confronted by death he felt one consolation. His concealment of the transmitter had been a wise move. The Plutonians would have no reason to suspect that he had uncovered and transmitted vital information which would make it necessary for them to change their plans. His death would satisfy them that the spy menace had been removed.

Yet he would not die if he could help it. His struggles took him to the edge of the throng. With a last desperate contraction of his muscles, he slipped from the grasp of those who held him.

He was running. The alarm ribbon loomed before him. He sprang, cleared it with a superhuman effort. Behind him he heard the patter of pursuing feet, and the shells of vibratory guns began to crumble the ground about him. He dived into a hollow. With a single movement he dropped into a crevice and drew a boulder over him to seal the opening. He waited for the holocaust.

It came. The giant projectors from the fortress were trained into the hollow. The light vibratory shells poured in. Rock and vegetation began to disintegrate to the accompaniment of intense heat.

A hissing roar filtered through to Ransome. Hot dust poured down on him and his body sweated in the ever-increasing warmth. At the point where he knew he could no longer expect protection from his crumbling hiding-place, the projectors were shut off and the wan light of search-beams flickered briefly over the shattered area.

Voices drifted down from the rim of the hollow: "He carried no transmitter. Anything he learned has died with him. A dangerous and seldom successful trade, this espionage. We'll have to arrange a check and inspection throughout the fleet."

Silence and darkness settled once more.

Kra-55 threw off the boulder that covered him. It was a thin wafer of stone now, pitted and cracked. Inch by inch he crept over the desiccated hollow, almost buried in hot dust. He was out of the hollow, running with catlike agility back through the gorge!

Jetta Gondila was waiting at the airlock.

"You sent the message?" he asked as she closed the inner door.

She nodded. "It took all the batteries in the ship and ten minutes of calculating before I could get a beam on Earth, but Captain Locke was waiting. He sent back an acknowledgment."

Ransome went to rid himself of the disguise and clinging dust. When he returned to the control cabin, Jetta was transcribing to a sheet of paper.

"There's a further message from Captain Locke," she announced. "We are to proceed by Route K6-KE49R in Zee Sector."

Ransome calculated quickly. "That will take us into the Superior-plane, somewhere above Venus-orbit. I wonder why Locke wants us to leave Ecliptic?"

"That's all that came through. I suppose we're to await further instructions."

The cruiser lifted from the spectral landscape, cleared the thinning atmosphere and unleashed its full power in outer space. Her nose turned inward toward

the central flames of the solar orb; each hour miles per second were added to her velocity. Her path would take her above Earth-orbit and millions of miles from the planet itself.

Alone in the control cabin, Ransome re-adjusted the direct-beam for communications with Earth. The cruiser's rate of acceleration decreased appreciably as power was stolen to drive the beam off at a tangent.

Ransome bent over the microphone.

Behind him the door swung open.

"What are you doing?" Jetta asked curiously.

"You know that all A-rank messages must be transmitted in entirety by each operative engaged on a case. Locke will be waiting for my check."

"Of course," Jetta said. "It's a wise precaution."

She turned away, quitted the cabin.

Again Ransome bent over the microphone, but before he could commence transmission he was startled by a scuffling sound in the outer corridor. He sprang up. Jetta's voice rang out, calling to him. He sensed that she must be in great danger, for the code of S.E.S. held no place for weaklings.

Again the girl's voice was raised in anguish and distress. Ransome swung open the door.

As he did so a stunning blow descended on him, so swiftly that he did not have time to see the weapon before it was withdrawn. As the veils of unconsciousness blinded him, he dimly beheld the snout of a viki-gun appear through the half-opened door. He tried to move but could not. The weapon hissed.

A pellet of vikiryth, the poison that brought death in less than thirty seconds, shattered in Kra-55's flesh.

A WHITE disc wavered in an encompassing greyness. It contracted, condensed, took on sharp outlines.

Ransome's blurred gaze focused on the face of the cruiser's chronometer. Even while he was struggling to rise his mind automatically calculated that he had lain unconscious for seven hours. Grimly he fingered the clotted bruise on his skull, then gazed about him. The cabin was empty.



He stepped into the corridor, paused, then called Jetta's name several times. There was no response. A swift search of the entire cruiser revealed that she was not on board.

He hovered in the storage compartment, prey to doubts and fears. How Jetta's disappearance could be linked with the Plutonian uprising, he could not think, but instinctively he felt that there was a connection. For a while he stood beside one of the transparent plates of the hull, half expectant, half afraid that he might see her body circling through the airless void. The stars blazed back at him. No dark shape occulted their prisms brilliance.

As he returned to the control cabin he noticed a fragment of paper lying near the corridor wall. He retrieved it, read the hastily scrawled words:

AM IN HANDS OF RAIDING PARTY OF PLUTONIANS. THEY KILLED KRA-55 WITH VIKIGUN BUT KEPT ME ALIVE IN HOPE OF EXTRACTING INFORMATION. I WRITE THIS AS THEY PREPARE ONE OF CRUISER'S LIFEBOATS TO TAKE ME TO PLUTO WHILE THEY GO ON—

The note ended with ominous abruptness, as if shadows had fallen across the page as Jetta dropped it.

"Killed me?" Ransome said aloud, and laughed quietly. Since the recent discovery of the vikirynth antidote, all espionage operative had had blood-stream inoculation against the poison and were now immune to its deadly molecular virus. The pellet that had entered his body had caused nothing more than a superficial wound.

Jetta, too, was still alive. A frown crossed Ransome's forehead as understanding of what was happening formed a clear pattern in his mind. It was of vital importance to Earth's safety that he contact Captain Locke at once.

A fresh problem confronted him when he seated himself before the direct-beam transmitter. Skilled hands had removed essential and irreplaceable parts from the mechanism. It was as inert as a block of stone.

The only alternative was to break down the cruiser's velocity and set a course for Earth. Ransome took his place at the control board, computed rapidly and set his fingers working rapidly over the keys. Preliminary shocks shook the ship; hour

by hour it began a steady deceleration from the course that was driving it out of the Solar-plane and into the black gulfs of Superior-space.

Two days later Ransome was submitting with ill-concealed impatience to the comprehensive identification check-up in the laboratory of S.E.S. Monotonously the lights wavered and coincided on the screens; the indifferent technicians proceeded remorselessly with their task to the final card.

"Good God!" Ransome gasped as he entered Locke's office. "To think that I have to spend twenty minutes in the laboratory when I have news that may concern the fate of Earth's fleet!"

Captain Gregori Locke held up a restraining hand. "I was beginning to think you were dead. Where have you been?"

Swiftly Ransome recounted his experiences, then tossed the note from Jetta Gondila on to the desk. Locke read it, let it fall from idle fingers.

"Yes, you would have been dead but for the antidote. Congratulations on a narrow escape, Ransome. But I'm sorry we've lost Ecka-39. Frankly, she has been invaluable to the Service, and I'm afraid she'll receive small mercy from Tragarath when she refuses to divulge information. . . ."

"Captain," Ransome said tensely, "you must let me see Ecka-39's transmission from Europa."

Locke searched unhurriedly through his files. "Here's a copy of the message," he said, studying Ransome intently.

CONSCIOUS of his chief's keen inspection, puzzled by something underlying it, Ransome read the printed card. His heart sank as what he had feared was confirmed. The information in no way matched that which he had learned in the Plutonian encampment.

He said dully: "This message is incorrect—a fake. . . ." He groaned. "The Earth fleet has fallen into a trap. . . . Earth is unprotected, our forces millions of miles away!"

Captain Locke's eyes cleared. He stood up, reached across his desk and shook Ransome's hand warmly.

"There was a fear lingering in my

mind," he said, "that you might be responsible for this message. Forgive me for doubting you. I realize now that you didn't betray us. You see, I've suspected for almost forty-eight hours that the message was fraudulent."

"You knew? But how?"

"First doubts were raised when your personal duplication of the message was not received. Still, presuming that you had been captured or killed, we'd have proceeded on the information received had not a second message come through."

"A second message!" Ransome gasped. "From whom?"

"From Orchen on Pluto, one of the few Councillors of the Emperor who have been friendly to Earth. A true patriot, Orchen swore that he was betraying Tragarath to save Pluto. Rather than see his world destroyed by the enraged forces of Earth and Venus (he feared a union that didn't exist), he revealed the entire plan of campaign, including the route and departure of Tragarath's true armada. He was willing that the armada should be destroyed and thus end the warlike trends of the Emperor—trends that could only bring doom to all Pluto."

"Our fleet has proceeded to an intermediate point. There it waits in the hope of receiving a message from me. It's for you to say, Ransome. Here are the messages from Europa and from Orchen. If the first is false, what of Orchen's? Has he tried to deceive us too with an air of sincerity which, I confess, I found hard to disbelieve?"

Ransome inspected the verbatim report of the Plutonian's communication.

"This information," he said, "coincides exactly with what I learned on Europa. The visible, approaching armada is a fleet of dummies. Orchen has given the correct details of the real fleet's maneuvers from Inferior-plane."

"Good!" cried Locke. He summoned an orderly, scribbled quickly on Orchen's message. Transmit this at once by direct-beam to our fleet. Admiral Sonthi can then proceed as he wishes." He turned back to Ransome. "Tragarath will pay dearly for this folly. Orchen will have his wish: no single warship will remain to Pluto at the end of another fifty hours."

"And now, from what you've told me,

I judge we're up against a powerful spy organization working for the Emperor. Ecka-39's record and identification are unimpeachable. So are yours. Someone must have cancelled Gondila's transmission and substituted the one I received. Don't ask me how! The same person or persons arranged the raid on your ship, your 'death' and Gondila's capture, to cover up the matter of the faked message."

"I suppose you can guess what comes next?" Ransome asked hesitantly.

"Certainly. You're 'dead.' One other must be silenced if that spy is to continue his work unsuspected on this planet—as he undoubtedly desires to do. That one is myself. I think we can expect a visitor before the night's over."

**I**N kay-sector of space, emerging from Inferior-plane, the squadrons of Earth met the vast armada of the god-Emperor, Tragarath. Through a thousand miles of emptiness raged the holocaustic beams of destruction with which each unit of the mighty fleets was armed. A tremendous radiance as of awakening suns lit the darkness, and through this, dark flecks in the mesh of light, sped the warring vessels, pursuing, engaging, destroying. No quarter was given or desired; no raider attempted to evade the encirclement; no Earth ship withdrew for recuperation. Now and for all time the issue must be resolved. One race only, black or white, could survive this unleashed fury.

On Earth Ransome and Captain Locke met again in the latter's offices. Sixteen hours had elapsed since their last conversation. Already news was filtering through that the war in space had begun.

Locke was calm and untroubled. He went about his routine work as though no death threat hung over him. Ransome, accustomed as he was to subjecting himself to dangerous missions, was forced to admire his chief's composure. At any instant death might strike from some unknown quarter.

Sensing some of the operative's suspense, Locke looked up and smiled. "Have you forgotten," he asked, "that S.E.S. headquarters is a fortress in its own right?"

Ransome shook his head grimly. "Your

visitor is later than you expected, but you're gambling with your life. I know that you've given instructions to the guards for all intruders to be passed without question. Practically anyone could reach this office at this moment."

"It's the only way. I'm the bait in the trap. We can't expect to catch our man if we don't leave the trap open for him—"

Sharp and unexpected came a knock at the door.

"Enter," said Locke, and Ransome's needle-gun sprang into his hand.

In the doorway stood Jetta Gondila!

Her eyes passed from Locke to Ransome.

"Arnold Ransome! I thought you were dead!"

"And we thought you were in the hands of the Plutonians," Locke said, relaxing in his seat.

"I was—but I escaped and came here immediately after I landed on Earth. I—"

"Before you proceed any further," Captain Locke interrupted her, "how do you account for the fraudulent and misleading message which you broadcast from Europa?"

Jetta's eyes widened in puzzlement. "Fraudulent and misleading? I don't understand. I transmitted only what Ransome sent me."

Locke bit his lip in perplexity. "I don't propose to doubt you, Eck-a-39. The fact is we're faced with a clever spy ring which somehow blocked out your message and made a substitution. Fortunately a correction was made in time."

"I don't understand," Jetta repeated, then her eyes caught again on Ransome's face and she frowned. "Why do you look at me in that way?" she demanded.

"Because," Ransome said distinctly, "you are not Eck-a-39. You are not Jetta Gondila!"

The girl wavered in the doorway, her mouth opened angrily, then she swung back on Captain Locke.

"What is the meaning of this?" she cried. "Is this some childish joke?"

Locke too was thunderstruck. "Explain yourself!" he demanded, half-doubtful of whether he had heard Ransome's words correctly.

"This isn't Jetta Gondila," Ransome

reiterated, and his clasp on the needle-gun was very conspicuous. "Ask her why she crept into your office in this fashion—without proper identification. She's here to kill you, Captain!"

The girl relaxed and a faint smile passed over her lips. She looked at captain Locke expectantly.

Locke was fingering the card that had just dropped on to his desk.

"I'm afraid you've made a distressing blunder, Ransome," he declared. "Eck-a-39 didn't 'creep' into my office. She came by way of the laboratory, where she was properly checked and identified. Even if I were to doubt my own powers of recognition, I couldn't ignore the evidence of this card. The check was perfect. This is Jetta Gondila."

"EXACTLY," said the girl, "and because I knew you would wish to see me immediately, I insisted that a laboratory guard should bring me straight to your office without waiting for a summons."

Locke's eyes rested on Ransome questioningly. "No doubt you want to explain and apologize for this blunder?"

"No," said Ransome coolly. "You see, I made no blunder. I repeat: this is *not* Jetta Gondila, Eck-a-39."

The girl's eyes glittered. "Take me to the laboratory yourself, Captain Locke, and test me in the presence of an armed guard. I'm perfectly willing to be identified for a second time. And I suggest that it might be well to submit Ransome to the check-up too!"

"Still," said Ransome, "you aren't Jetta Gondila. You deceived Locke and me. You accompanied me to Europa. There you ignored my message and sent a false one. Later, when I proposed to re-transmit the information to Earth, ruining your scheme to decoy our fleet, you lured me from the radio with screams, so that I wouldn't have time to send any story in the thirty seconds which you thought remained to me after you fired a viki-pellet into me. You left a false message to cover your trail—took a lifeboat and came to Earth. You believed that your subterfuges had successfully sent our fleet on a false trail and you could be of further service on Earth while Tragarath's ships

were attacking. So you planned to kill Captain Locke, the only other one who knew you'd been on Europa and would ask questions, and carry on your espionage as Jetta Gondila."

"A foolish tissue of lies," the girl said with a gesture of disgust. "The identification test is infallible. Please dismiss this man, Captain Locke. I'm tired of insults and wish to speak to you on important matters."

"I suppose," Ransome resumed, "you've only just arrived on Earth because lifeboats are slower than cruisers. You came straight here to kill Captain Locke and to wait and see how you could help the Plutonian fleet when it arrived. You may be interested to know that Tragarath's forces are being destroyed at this very moment."

Before Locke could come to a decision on the confusing matter confronting him, Ransome strode across the room and closed the door, placing himself between it and the girl.

"Now for proof of all I've said," he announced.

Before she could guess his intention, he seized the girl and tossed her guns across the room. She struggled with sinewy strength and called loudly to Gregori Locke for assistance.

Grimly Ransome proceeded with his task.

Abruptly there was a tearing sound under his grasping fingers. A white tissue of artificial skin tore reluctantly from the girl's neck and across her shoulders. Ransome's hand sought her face, closed over it and pulled strongly. A thin layer of plastic features came away, revealing a true face of entirely different contours.

And everything exposed by the removal of the artificial skin was coal black in color!

Something about the broad nose, the set of the lips and pointed chin, was familiar to Ransome. Methodically, while the girl no longer struggled, he removed the wig from the shaven skull and the blue glasses from the eye-sockets.

At his first glimpse of the cold green eyes, he knew.

"Allegra—Tragarath's daughter!" he gasped. "That should convince you, Captain. This one who masqueraded as Eck-

39 is a Plutonian of the highest position, the daughter of the Emperor, sent here to spy on S.E.S. and disrupt our plans. She wears an artificial white skin over built-up features and her entire body—except—except—"

He was staring in horror at Allegra's shoulders, exposed by a torn tunic, for at that point the artificial skin had ended and black skin merged hideously—with pure white arms!

"Except for what?" Locke demanded.

"Except for her arms," Ransome continued in a low voice. "They must be the arms of Jetta Gondila. Jetta was captured and destroyed, except for her arms. They were transplanted to Allegra by advanced surgery that united bone, nerve, arteries, veins and muscles. Thus was the infallible identification of Eck-39, vested in Allegra. . . ."

Both men stared in stunned silence at the last living reminders of Eck-39 who had died in the name of S.E.S.

Abruptly Captain Locke shook himself as if casting off a heavy weight.

"In this trade," he said, "even a princess can't hope for preferential treatment."

Allegra nodded calmly.

Locke called a guard. "Take this prisoner. Accord her the treatment customarily meted out to those detected in espionage. The papers will be ready in a minute. The sentence is—death."

Allegra's gaze swept round and round the room, as though her eyes, soon to be veiled by eternal darkness, sought to drink in vast reservoirs of the things that make up existence, a last and all-absorbing memory.

"Goodbye, Captain Locke—and you, Kra-55," she said, and walked out under the guard's surveillance.

They did not see her again. They learned that she never reached the lethal chamber but died in the corridors, victim of a self-administered poison.

AN hour later Locke and Ransome were walking in the tiny sanctuary to which Locke had the only key. It was an inner hall of S.E.S.'s vast building, a garden, dimly lighted, soft underfoot with flowering grass, trees whispering in cool air currents.

Locke said: "You haven't told me why you were so sure that Allegra wasn't the true Gondila, or how you suspected she was a Plutonian."

"It was simple. I'm surprised you didn't notice what I did. Re-read this note that Allegra left in my cruiser: '... killed Kra-55 with viki-gun.' All S.E.S. operatives know that they are immune to vikiryth since the injections of the antidote. Allegra didn't know—therefore she must be fraudulent. And knowing that she wasn't Ecka-39, it wasn't hard to put little things together to guess that she was a Plutonian;—little things like her reluctance to appear in strong light when we first met in your office (Plutonians aren't accustomed to a great deal of light); her ignorance of the rule on check-messages by operatives; her impassive face—a necessary precaution to excuse the immobility of the built-up features. . . ."

"In this sanctuary," Locke said slowly, "unknown to all but a chosen few, I have gathered many mementoes of exploits that have made S.E.S. the glorious but unknown service. Glorious to us—unknown to Earth's millions. Some of the mementoes you have noticed: little monuments, fragments from sundered ships, urns that hold the ashes of valiant operatives." He paused before a white casket on a marble base. "We come now to the latest and one of the most distinguished of relics. This casket contains a memento of one whom we may well remember with pride: I refer to the only discoverable remains of Ecka-39, Jetta Gondila—her white, efficient arms, taken back from the one who stole them." His voice quickened. "Beside the last relics of one who paid with her dearest possession in the name of the Service, let me make a wish—that our calm skies shall not soon flame again with conflict, that even now the news of the ultimate destruction of the Emperor's armada is speeding to Earth!"

They turned quietly away.

## PS's Feature Flash

**FLASHING** you the highlights on one of the men you've met in the preceding pages—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories.

EVER since he burst forth in these pages with the much-discussed "World of Mockery" two issues ago, we've been actively wondering about Sam Moskowitz. After reading his equally provocative "Man of the Stars," we made a pretty safe bet that you'd like to know about him too. So, with less reticence than curiosity, we despatched our pet carrier pigeon to Long Island with strict orders not to return until he'd garnered the biographical fleece. He was back in no time, his beak wreathed with disgusting smugness, and cooingly referring to himself as "Jason." But he did get the dope. Herewith, then, Moskowitz—

I'm more or less of a graduate fan, having been a "nut" on science-fiction now for so long I can scarcely remember. My collection of science-fiction fan and professional magazines has grown vast (to put it mildly), and the bug is still with me.

During the past few years I've contributed to more than a quarter of a hundred fan magazines, edited New Fandom, Helios, Fantasy Review, Current Fantasy, and innumerable others, and am still at it with "Fantasy Times." I was chairman of two large conventions, The First National Science Fiction Convention in Newark in 1938, which 125 attended, and The First World Science Fiction Convention in New York in 1939 which 200 attended. Also the genesis of the club New Fandom, which grew at one time to the largest in the history of fandom was my brainchild.

I'm twenty-one, five foot ten and one-half, 175 pounds, dark hair and complexion, and the army has just told me they don't want me. At first I felt elated, but upon thinking it over I can't help being just a bit insulted—lb—the nerve.

Worked in candy store, grocery store, department store and book store, as packer and wrapper, peddler, pin boy, magazine salesman, and even put in nine months as a boxing instructor.

Watching a friend of mine get jilted by a girl inspired "Man of the Stars" and a personal experience of my own enabled me to put myself in the Captain's place and write the story.

I am very sincere in my writing of science-fiction, for I have had a deep, ingrained love of this type of mental expression. I hope some day to "rate" as an author of science-fiction, and I would like to extend my thanks to the editor of "Planet Stories" who has been more than helpful.

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# ZURK

By Richard O. Lewis

**Gentle Marene was next when the black space cruiser called for its youth-levy. If only Zurk would spark to life—Zurk, this huge, part-human war-machine of tubular steel muscles and blank, mechanical mind.**

**T**HERE was both agony and defeat etched deeply into Guyard's lean face as he stood there in the center of the hidden, attic laboratory. His fists were clinched tightly at his sides and his hollow eyes were staring tensely and with supplication at the steel monstrosity before him.

"Zurk, you must save her!" he pleaded. "You must save Marene!"

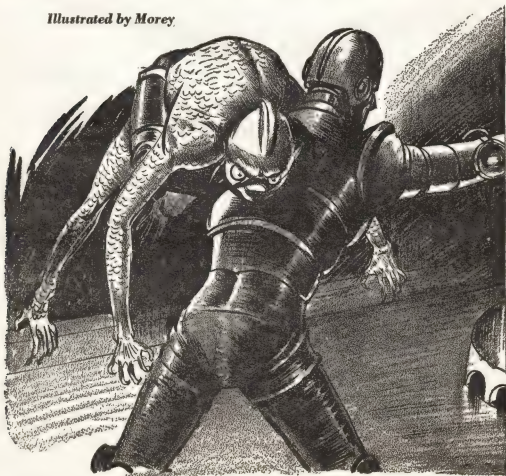
Zurk, the man of steel, made no move. He sat there expressionless, his electric-cell eyes staring out through the small window at the far end of the laboratory.

Year after year, the steel giant had sat there staring through that window, staring out into dim, perpetual daylight that always enveloped that half of the moon which kept its face constantly toward Jupiter.

Week after week and month after month, Guyard had stood before the giant, had stood there hurling thought-waves into the brain, but to no avail. Something was wrong somewhere within the intricate mechanism, some trouble he could not locate.

Nervous and shaken, he stood there

*Illustrated by Morey*





glaring into the expressionless eyes. There were but a scant two weeks left. Then the evil creatures from the Land of Darkness on the other side of the moon would come to claim Marene.

Desperation gave power to Guyard's tired brain. "Zurk!" His eyes blazed into the giant's with a final effort. "Move your head!"

For a brief instant, Guyard was certain that a feeble thought-wave had tried to penetrate his own brain; he thought he caught a faint glow in the eyes.

Then he wheeled quickly at the sound of a step upon the ladder up to the trapdoor in the floor. His hand flashed to the gun at his belt, and he waited tensely.

His hand relaxed as the door swung

*His great steel hand shot out and seized Zaldi's scaly neck.*



slowly upwards and he saw dark curls and a smiling face. Marene. Marene, his daughter.

He went quickly to her, helped her up into the room and stood for a moment with his arms about her shoulders, holding her to him.

A crazy panorama of thoughts went through his head. He remembered the day of her birth aboard that ill-fated spaceship that had set out to colonize Mars. That was the same day the commander of the ship had reported engine trouble.

He remembered the first four years of her life aboard that helpless ship, the ship that had finally landed the thousand weary colonists on this moon of Jupiter's.

And then had come the creatures from the Land of Darkness to claim youth as a tribute from the helpless Earthians. Once every four years, they came to claim young men and women for some hideous experiment of theirs on the other side of the moon.

And now Marene was just sixteen, and the creatures would be coming again in their black spaceship within two weeks! Guyard was thankful that death had spared Marene's mother from this greater horror.

He held the girl tightly to him.

She drew away finally and smiled up at him with the bravery of youth. "Father," she said, "whatever happens, I'm not afraid." Her voice was like calm music to his troubled brain. "Anyway, I have news for you!"

"News?"

"Yes. Captain Simms is going to try—may be trying right this instant—to get a radio message through to Earth!"

"Impossible!" Guyard shook his head quickly. "Zuldi and his guards keep the city under constant surveillance! Captain Simms should know better than to try! Zuldi and his devils will detect the vibration instantly!"

"But Captain Simms is trying a different type of sender," Marene explained. "He hopes that Zuldi's detectors will not . . ."

She broke off suddenly.

Guyard, too, heard the tumult somewhere out in the street, the sound of croaking shouts. He hurried to the window and looked out.

THERE in the street almost below him stood Zuldi and six other of the hated creatures, their scaly, bloated bodies smeared with a green substance as protection against the rigors of light. Thick-lensed glasses shaded their eyes.

Zuldi, croaking loudly to attract attention, was waving his arms and pointing downward at the broken body of Captain Simms that lay at his feet. Beside the dead man lay the tangled mass of what might once have been a radio, a radio that would never send its message to distant Earth.

Zuldi stopped his shouting, spat upon the man in the dust and sent a heavily-clawed foot raking over the already lacerated chest. He was using Captain Simms as an example to all other Earthians in the city.

Guyard felt a hot bitterness rise uncontrollably within him. He flung the window open, jerked the gun from his belt and centered the sights upon the center of Zuldi's bone-crested forehead.

"Damn him!" he breathed. "I'll . . ."

It was Marene who knocked the gun down before he had a chance to fire. A great fear was in her eyes as she wrested the weapon from his fingers. "You can't do it, Father! You can't do it!" She thrust the gun into a pocket beneath her short coat.

"Putting Zuldi out of the way would not help us," she reminded him. "The other Earthians had guns. That would discover you had a gun and guess that others would only kill you. They would end our chances to fight the black ship when it comes."

A semblance of reason came back to Guyard. For the past two years, he had, when not training Zurk's mind, been turning out gun after gun in his small, electric furnace. Those guns had been secretly distributed to the men of the city to use when the right moment came. And now he had come very nearly to ruining those chances.

He began speaking, as if thinking aloud. "They have dismantled our spaceship, broken our radios and killed every man who has tried to get a message through to Earth. They have taken our youth, searched out our secret laboratories and killed our scientists."

His eyes were blazing. "But this time we are going to fight!"

Guyard knew that a fight with the powerful creatures from the Land of Darkness would mean annihilation for the Earthians. But there was no other apparent way.

He turned again to the steel giant, his eyes misty. "Had Zurk not failed us," he said, "I should have built a hundred more like him. Insulated against the shock of the voltage guns, a hundred men of steel could have marched into the Land of Darkness and crushed our captors—wiped them out!"

Marene, too, had turned to look at the giant. She went forward now, raised one of the huge hands and let it fall with a metallic, squeaking "z-zzurk." Long ago, as a small child, she had done that same thing, and because of the sound had named the giant "Zurk."

She stood looking up into the expressionless eyes. When she spoke, her voice was like that of a small girl talking to a disobedient doll. "You must not fail us now, Zurk. We need you. You must help us!"

Guyard went to her and put an arm about her shoulders. "It's no use," he said. "I've tried day after day. He makes no move."

"But I'm certain he understands you," insisted the girl. "Sometimes I am certain I have caught a glow in his eyes. A glow of understanding."

"He *does* understand me!" Guyard was staring into the eyes again, tense with emotion. "His brain is a part of my very own! I have nurtured that brain with my own thoughts. I have trained it."

Then he shook his head slowly. "But it's no use. It is too late. One of him would not be enough. There is no time to build more."

Guyard was so busy with his own thoughts that he did not hear the scaly sound of feet upon the ladder leading up into the laboratory. He did not see the bone-crested head that came slowly up above the level of the floor behind him.

His first indication of danger was a green-smearing arm that whipped about Marene and jerked her roughly away from him.

Guyard's hand raked at his belt as he

wheeled about. But the gun was not in his belt. Marene had taken it from him, had placed it beneath her own short coat. He was unarmed.

Four of the creatures were already in the room, Zuldi among them. More were coming up through the trap door.

Guyard knew that he was facing death, a hideous death. Zuldi and his monsters would gleefully *claw* him to pieces, throw him into the street.

One of the creatures charged him suddenly with huge arms and clawed hands outstretched.

**D**ESPERATION and a sense of his own helplessness surged through Guyard. It gave him a mad strength beyond all reason. His balled fist lashed out with all the fury that twelve horrible years of hatred could give it. The flesh and bone of the beast's face fairly exploded into gory pulp as the blow landed.

At almost the same instant, another clawed hand grasped Guyard by the shoulder and sent him spinning backward to land with a crash against the table at the far side of the room. It was Zuldi.

Guyard stood leaning against the table, dazed and shaken.

He heard Marene's scream and saw the two creatures forcing her down through the trap door. They would not harm her. They would let her live for a worse fate. The black ship would be coming in less than two weeks.

"We saw you open the window a while ago. That's what brought us up." Zuldi was standing before him, his huge, round mouth with its yellow teeth hanging open in pleasure. "I'm so glad we came. Two examples in the same morning is more than I had hoped for."

Guyard's hand closed over a heavy wrench upon the table behind him. He had no hope of winning through; his only desire was to take Zuldi with him in death.

One of the guards saw the act, shouted a warning and hastily drew his voltage gun.

With a mad cry upon his lips, Guyard sprang forward with wrench swinging. Zuldi's evil face was before him. Guyard wanted to smash it, obliterate it.

But the wrench never reached its mark. A crackling flame filled the room. Guyard

was spun half way around as the full charge of the voltage gun caught him high in the right side of his chest and filled his whole body with a burning agony.

The wrench dropped to the floor. His arms became leaden things that hung heavily at his sides. He stood there gasping for air. Completely burned out inside, he had but a few seconds left. Only his brain seemed to be alive.

Zuldi was before him, his hideous face black with anger beneath its smeared green. "So!" he hissed. "You would dare to strike!" His clawed hand flashed out to rake down the face and chest of the helpless man.

Guyard felt no pain. His whole body was numb, dying. He stood there while Zuldi tore at him, stood there staring straight into the eyes of the great steel giant.

"Zurk!" The thought-wave went out with all the power of his brain. "*Zurk! You've . . . you've got to save . . . Marene!*"

For some reason, he felt closer to that steel-cased brain than he had ever felt before. He saw the light in the giant's eyes change almost imperceptibly. And he felt thought-waves hammering at his own brain. Zurk, even at the last moment, was trying to tell him something. But the message was garbled, incoherent.

Then his tortured lungs could breathe no longer. His legs crumpled painlessly beneath him and he went sprawling forward to come to rest with one arm flung out across a steel foot.

The next instant was a frightful one. It was filled with agony, bewilderment and awful blackness. It seemed to Guyard that something was reaching out for him, something that was struggling to wrest him away from the void of nothingness.

Then there was a sudden peace—and silence.

**T**HE dim walls of the laboratory slowly took form. They seemed to grow out of nothingness. Gradually they began to take on a definite shape and brightness. Other objects in the room became clear-cut and distinct. And sound vibrations floated in.

Guyard was puzzled. He thought he must be awakening from some nightmare.

Perhaps, after all, Zuldi and his men had been but a bad dream.

No! There was blood upon the floor of the laboratory! The electric furnace that had once been upon the table was gone, had been torn away! The wrench still lay where it had fallen from his nerveless fingers!

He was dead! His body had been thrown into the street! And yet. . . .

Guyard was more bewildered than ever. His body was dead! And yet he could see! His consciousness was still alive!

For a long moment, he wondered. Then the realization of what had happened came to him with a startling clearness. During his last moment of life, he had been sending a message to Zurk's brain, had been in the closest harmony with it. And during that last moment, his own consciousness, released by the death of his body, had leaped the gap between those two closely related brains!

*He was now occupying Zurk's brain! He was now Zurk!*

The thought of it thrilled him. He saw his barrel-like chest of steel, his huge arms, his extended, powerful legs.

He would kill Zuldi now!

But first he would go to Marene. He would tell her that he was still alive. He would explain to her the transformation that had taken place.

He would go . . . now. . . .

His thoughts broke off suddenly. Something was wrong. He had willed to rise. But his great body had not responded.

Half frightened, he tried again with all the force of his new-found brain.

A tiny vibration at the back of his neck became increasingly painful. The vibration grew quickly in intensity until it became a searing flame of agony, a searing flame that robbed him of his strength and sent the walls of the laboratory floating away into darkness.

It seemed to Zurk—or Guyard—that it was hours before the energy rebuilt itself within the steel frame.

He knew now where the trouble was. One of the hundred tiny wires at the back of his neck was loose; it was shorting his energy through the huge body.

That was the message Zurk had been trying to get through to him even at the last moment! That was what had kept

the man of steel immobile through the years!

One tiny, thread-like wire had cheated a thousand Earthians from their freedom! And there was nothing to be done!

The trap door opened slowly some time later, and Marene came up into the room. Her eyes were hollow and sad, but she seemed even more beautiful.

Zurk could not feel the hot tears that coursed down over the steel hand that Marene was holding against her soft cheek; but he could hear the sweet vibrations of her voice.

"Zurk. Oh, Zurk!" She was sobbing quietly against the hand she held. "You're . . . you're the only one I have left now."

She raised her head and choked back the tears. "Forgive me, Zurk," she pleaded, "and please understand. . . ."

The transformed Zurk would have given anything to let her know that he understood. As it was, he struggled with all his might to give her some sign of understanding, struggled until the small flame at the back of his neck grew white hot and sent him reeling into an oblivion filled with blackness.

When light rays and sound vibrations again began streaming into his consciousness, Marene had gone.

He didn't know how much time had elapsed since Zaldi's visit. Maybe a day. Maybe a week. Soon the black ship would be coming. . . .

The thought of that black ship and what it meant sent Zurk into another frantic struggle against the thing at the back of his neck. Time and time again he struggled until blackness overcame him.

ONCE, when consciousness returned to him, he became aware of two people standing before him looking up at him.

One was Marene. The other was a slim youth a year or two older than she.

"Too bad he doesn't work," the young man was saying. "He would be such a help in the fight that is soon to come."

"Yes," said Marene. Her voice was hopeful. "Perhaps you could find out what is wrong with him."

A ray of hope flashed through Zurk. If the young man could find the loose wire at the back of his neck. . . .

But the young man was shaking his head. "There is not time enough for that," he said. "It would take weeks to go over that intricate mechanism. As it is, I have only time enough to get the gun assembled and placed."

Zurk watched Marene lead the young man to the table at the end of the room near the window. She pressed a button, and a small door slid open in the floor beneath the table to expose two neatly coiled electrodes.

The young man's face lighted. "Just the thing," he said. "With that electrical power, my gun is bound to be a success!"

"But it's dangerous," warned Marene. "Zaldi knows of this laboratory."

"I doubt if he'll come back. He'll probably believe that no one would dare to use this laboratory again." A shadow of doubt came across the young man's face. "But I can't understand how it happened that Zaldi tore out the electric furnace in which your father built the guns but failed to molest Zurk."

Zurk could have told him. The answer was somewhere back in his sub-conscious mind. Zaldi had considered the metal giant as being but some Earthian god, a powerless entity. He had spat upon the god contemptuously and had left it standing.

Marene's hand was upon the young man's arm and she was looking up into his eyes. "Bob," she said earnestly, "your gun *must* be a success! It is not just for our own sakes; there are a thousand other lives depending upon it."

Bob put his hand over hers. "It *will* be a success!" he promised. Then, "But we've got to hurry. If they come a day earlier. . . . If they should happen to come tomorrow. . . ."

He left the sentence unfinished, gave Marene's hand a reassuring squeeze and hurried to the trap door that led down from the attic laboratory.

Guyard was shocked to find that the two weeks was nearly up, was surprised to learn that his struggles against the thing at the back of his neck had sent him into such long periods of blackness. But the passing of time made one thing clear to him; it explained why he now constantly thought of himself not as Guyard, the man, but as Zurk, the giant of steel!

The bustle of work in the laboratory made Zurk almost forget his helplessness. Time and time again, the young man hurried into the room to take molded pieces of steel from beneath his coat and to pile them upon the table before Marene.

"Now!" he said finally. "Now if we can get them assembled in time!"

He took off his coat and set to work with the hopeful energy of youth.

"It's one of the blast rockets from the spaceship that brought us here," he explained. "The rockets get their power by disintegrating the atoms of fuel within their chambers. If we can change the procedure a bit, if we can get the disintegrating principle to work at long range instead of being confined merely to the fuel chamber."

Zurk got the idea instantly. A disintegrator! The youth was constructing a long-range disintegrator with which to blow the black ship out of the sky! The thrill of it coursed through his brain. The Earthians were going to fight! They were going to make a last stand against the Creatures of Darkness.

But he, Zurk, would be powerless to help.

**T**HROUGH the long hours of the day and night, Zurk sat there watching the two youngsters at their toil. They were working against time now, struggling for the right of freedom and happiness.

But Zaldi might come. He might come before the gun was finished. Or he might come before the arrival of the black ship.

Hours later, Bob made the final adjustments on the machine and stepped back to look at it. His face was pale and his hands trembled slightly with excitement.

"Now to test it!" he told Marene. "And . . . and I hope it works!"

He turned the long snout of the gun toward the open window, connected the electrodes and made final adjustments.

"Wait!" Marene placed a hand upon his arm. A sudden fear had come into her sparkling eyes. "If the gun makes a flash or a vibration of any kind, Zaldi will be sure to know. He will come here immediately!"

Bob paused. "That's right," he said finally. Then, "But we've got to test it! We can't wait until the black ship comes!

We've got to be *sure*!"

They stood there for a moment gazing into each other's eyes. Then Bob put his arm about her and drew her to him. "It doesn't matter so much about us," he told her. "We are doomed anyway. It's your father and my father and all the others in the city that we must think about! It is they. . . ."

He broke off short, his lips tight and his eyes blazing out of the window toward the far-away, dark horizon from whence the black ship would come. Several giant birds were soaring lazily through the pale sky.

The young man seemed much older as he stood there. Zurk saw the lines of care in the cleanly cut face. And, at last, he recognized the youth. Bob Simms. The son of Captain Simms whose dead body had been dragged through the dusty streets by Zaldi and his men.

"We've got to test it!" the young man said again.

Zurk saw him put his shoulder determinedly against the piece and wheel the snout of it toward one of the soaring birds just outside the window.

Zurk's photo-electric eyes saw the vibration of the charge slit through the pale sky scant inches from the bird as the youth pressed the release.

But Bob had not seen that tell-tale vibration. He had seen only that the bird before him remained unharmed. The bitterness of defeat showed in his face.

"Try again," urged Marene.

Once again, the youth aimed the gun and pressed the release with trembling fingers.

And once again Zurk's eyes saw the vibration miss its mark by inches. But he saw something else. He saw something no human eyes could see. Miles away on the far horizon, he saw another giant bird caught squarely by the charge. The bird desolved instantly into a smoky haze as every atom within it suddenly lost its valence.

Zurk could have cried out with satisfaction had it not been for the tiny wire that shorted itself with white heat at the back of his neck.

It made him realize once more his complete helplessness.

Marene and the young man were stand-



ing there looking dejectedly at the gun. "It won't work," Bob groaned. "I've got to take it apart. I've got to try again."

Zurk tried with all his might to tell the young man that the gun was a success. He tried until blackness sought to engulf him.

Then his delicate ears picked up a sound vibration that sent a chill through his brain. He could hear the hurried scrape of many clawed feet in the street below.

Zuldi and his men! They had detected the vibration of the gun! They were hurrying to investigate!

And there was something else. Far above the distant horizon was a black speck that grew suddenly larger as it leaped forward through the pale sky.

The black ship! It was coming a day ahead of schedule!

**Z**URK struggled desperately to warn the two who stood there in the attic laboratory. He tried to warn them of the black ship and of Zuldi and his guards who were even now within the house.

But his struggles were in vain. The hot pain stabbed deep into the back of his neck, robbing him of his strength. The walls of the room reeled and faded before his waning eyes.

He knew that further struggle was useless. It would only send him plunging deeper into that awful blackness. Anyway, he seemed not to have the strength to struggle more.

He sat there motionless and terror stricken while the scene unfolded before his eyes.

Bob and Marene had caught sight of the ship. It had come to a hovering stop just outside the window, its black hull seeming to fill the whole sky. A long ladder had been let down from one of its open ports and Creatures of Darkness were filing down into the city.

Soon those evil monsters would be ferreting out the healthy youth of the city.

Zurk, powerless to stop them or to shout a warning, watched Zuldi and his men come quickly up into the laboratory through the trap door.

Neither Bob nor Marene saw their danger. Marene was staring fearfully out at the black ship and Bob was working frantically with the gun.

"If we can blast the ship out of the sky," Bob was saying. "If we can kill the creatures already in the city, get their voltage guns. . . ."

Bob never finished his hopes. A giant, clawed hand clutched him by the shoulder at that moment and spun him back and away from the gun, spun him back and away until he nearly collided with Zurk's steel frame.

Zurk felt the strain and horror of it all driving him deeper into blackness.

Zuldi's hideous face was twisted into an anticipatory smirk. He took a slow, deliberate step closer to the young man.

"You Earthians will never learn," he hissed. His clawed fingers were writhing nervously. "But one more example will not hurt. You know the penalty."

Bob's jaws were clamped tightly. His whole body was trembling with pent rage and hate. He stood there looking steadily into the beast's eyes, waiting.

"One less youth in the shipment to the other side will make little difference," Zuldi smirked. "The blood we have taken in the past is nearly enough for our needs. The transfusions have rendered my people almost immune from the ravages of heat and light rays."

His red eyes were glowing behind their protective glasses. His heavy lips were twisting gloatingly. "Soon we shall be able to leave the Land of Darkness. Soon we shall conquer new lands."

His eyes narrowed and he took a sudden step forward, clawed hands extended. "And we shall have no further use for Earthians!"

"Damn you!" Bob's set face was livid with emotion. "Damn you!" he shouted again. "You'll never live to kill another Earthian!"

His hand swept into the open front of his shirt and came out again with one of the hand guns Zurk—or Guyard—had made in the secret furnace. In one swift motion, he leveled the gun at Zuldi's huge chest and squeezed the trigger.

The crash of the explosion jarred against Zurk's ears with a shattering force that drove some of the blackness from his brain. He saw immediately that the charge had not reached its intended mark.

One of the other creatures, at sight of the gun, had leaped suddenly forward—to

receive the heavy slug in his own chest.

The bullet did not stop him. His momentum carried his dead body forward to crash into Bob, to knock the gun from his hand and to send him spinning and stumbling backward.

Zuldi laughed, and drew his voltage gun.

During that split second, a thousand other vibrations smashed into Zurk's hot brain. He heard bedlam break loose in the streets below. The Earthians were fighting!

Mingled with the crash of the hand guns and the slithering vibrations of the voltage weapons were cries, groans, shouts and curses. And over it all came the sudden, high-pitched whine of the black ship's radio, a whine to the far side of the moon for help.

Soon there would be other black ships.

Marene was standing there looking at him, her eyes staring into his own, pleading with him! Then she turned and made a dash for the long-snouted gun upon the table, only to be dragged away from it by two of the monsters.

Zurk knew that the last, insane episode had come. This was to be the last of the Earthians! And if he were ever going to come to their aid, he must do it now.

HE threw all the power of his giant frame into the will to stand, into the will to rise up and to slay these evil creatures about him.

He tried to ignore the stabbing pain at his back, tried to believe it did not exist. He hurled forth his energy in wave after wave until the flame became a consuming thing that ate deep within him and filled his brain with the shadows of dark despair.

Through that creeping blackness, he saw Bob Simms frantically try to evade the sweep of Zuldi's weapon. He felt the young man stumble over one of his helpless, steel feet, felt him stagger against his metal knee and fall.

And at almost the same instant the blast from Zuldi's voltage gun went crashing through the room.

Zurk saw the streak of the charge as it passed just above the fallen youth and felt the full, deadly shock of it strike squarely into his own huge chest of steel with a force that quaked the whole of his giant frame.

Then came deep silence. It seemed that all time had suddenly stopped.

Zuldi and the other creatures were standing there staring at him, their bulging eyes terror-stricken.

The vibration of Marene's sudden cry swept against his ears. "*Zurk! You are free!*"

He realized then what had happened. His steel frame had taken the full stock of Zuldi's voltage gun. And that shock had burned off the wire that had been shorting his energy at the back of his neck!

He was standing there on his own two feet! He was moving his head! He was free!

Withering blasts from a half dozen voltage guns tore suddenly into his steel body, rocking him on his feet. But he didn't care. He was free!

A savage cry came from his steel throat as he brushed aside the creatures and their guns. He went directly to the opening in the floor, put his heavy foot against the trap door and kicked it shut with a splintering crash that wedged it tightly home.

Then he turned slowly about to face Zuldi and the creatures. There was no escape for them now!

From outside, came the sound of successive, powerful blasts. The black ship was bringing its heavy guns into action, was bombarding the city.

Zurk caught two of the creatures as a great cat would catch mice. Their gibbering death-cries filled his ears with pleasure as he smashed their heads together and flung their lifeless bodies against the wall.

"The disintegrator!" he shouted to Bob. "Knock that ship out of the sky! This will be a fight they will remember!"

His steel fist crashed into the evil brain of another.

Then came a roaring bolt of destruction more powerful than all the others. It struck the corner of the attic, quaked the building to its foundations and sent one wall of the laboratory swirling away in a burst of flying debris.

Two of the trapped creatures sprang out of the opening, screaming. Zuldi would have followed had not Zurk clutched him up in his huge hands. Slowly, the man of steel twisted the evil creature's

head about in a complete circle. Then he raised the lifeless body high into the air and cast it down into the dust of the street below.

He turned to find Marene and Bob standing beside the gun. Marene was sobbing quietly. Bob was staring bewilderedly at the dangling end of one of the electrodes he held in his hands.

"The blast from the ship!" he cried. "The blast from the ship carried away one of the electrodes! We are without power for the disintegrator!"

Zurk took the severed cable into his own hands. He saw immediately that repairs were out of the question. A long section had been blasted away between the floor and the gun. And the disintegrator was useless without power!

Another blast from the black ship shuddered the laboratory and brought answering sparks from Zurk's steel shell.

Then he knew! The solution came startlingly clear to his brain. He would make the connection with his own metal body!

**G**RASPING the cable tighter in his hand, he set his foot down heavily upon the other end that lay upon the floor.

His eyes glowed as he wheeled the snout of the gun about with his free hand, wheeled it directly toward the heart of the black ship and pressed the release with his thumb.

The burning wave of hot power that surged through him nearly blinded him. But he saw the great ship shudder as the disintegrating force smashed into it, saw it lose form in a shapeless cloud of nothingness as its neutralized atoms went spinning away.

A great cry of triumph rang out from the fighting men of the city. The hand guns redoubled their fury.

"They've got the creatures on the run!" It was Marene. She was looking down into the street from the broken wall of the laboratory.

But there were more ships coming. Zurk saw the tiny black specks that had leaped above the far horizon.

He stopped two of them while they were still but specks, saw a third wheel back toward the dark side, its radio whining. The others came hurtling on.

Methodically, one by one, he began blasting them from the sky. The hot charges of power that coursed through his body bleared his eyes and jarred his senses.

Only two of the ships remained. He sent one of them into oblivion; missed the other. Twice more, the ravishing shudders of power racked his body before the black ship and its evil crew vanished into nothingness before his burning eyes.

But there was no time for rest. Other black ships were coming.

Zurk, now a glowing, burning thing, felt himself moving the gun slowly from one to another of the ships.

Zurk was surprised to find so few ships left. He must have gotten more of them than he had thought. If he had been able to hang on a moment or two longer. . . .

A wave of blackness began to spread over him.

The great surges of energy pounding devastatingly through his heat-ridden body jarred him back again into consciousness. Through a black and red mist, he saw the youth bending over the gun. The young man's eyes were afire with the light of battle and his face was grim as he worked the weapon deliberately and methodically.

Zurk felt an overwhelming desire for peace creep over him. He knew what that meant.

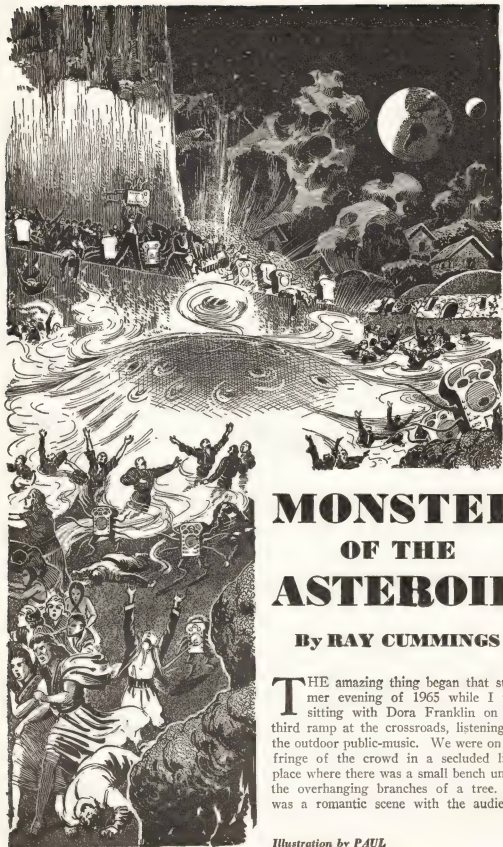
But he didn't care. His steel body was solidly fused to the ends of the cable. Even in death, his body would continue to hold the connection while Bob Simms rid the city of the demons for all time. Never again would the black ships dare to attack. And the Earthians could rebuild their own spaceship.

His heavy head slumped slowly forward to rest upon his hot arm. The wild, triumphant shouts of the people in the street came but dimly to his ears as he felt himself swimming away into a warm, red mist.

Then came the last vibration of all. It was an infinitely sweet vibration that caressed his tired brain and gave to him the peace he needed.

He knew it was Marene—*his Marene*—who had set that vibration into motion with her lips as close to his ear as she dared.

"Thank you, Zurk," came that last vibration. "Thank you, *Father!*"



# MONSTER OF THE ASTEROID

By RAY CUMMINGS

THE amazing thing began that summer evening of 1965 while I was sitting with Dora Franklin on the third ramp at the crossroads, listening to the outdoor public-music. We were on the fringe of the crowd in a secluded little place where there was a small bench under the overhanging branches of a tree. It was a romantic scene with the audience

*Illustration by PAUL*



**They might gamble, but win or lose the take was death for these two new slaves of the Master of that pitted Devil's Isle of outer space.**

seated in crescent rows under the strings of colored tubelights. My arm went around Dora, with her head against my shoulder as we listened to the soft exotic music.

Around us, countless other couples were also listening in silence.

A pair of young lovers. I realize now that was doubtless what first attracted the furtive man to us. How long he and his weird little companion had been watching us I have no idea. I was aware of the two dark shapes in the shadow under a





nearly tree—a tall blob and a short one. Then the tall one came forward; the short one lurked in the deep shadows a few feet away.

"The music is very pretty?" a guttural voice said. It was a man in a long, dull-black cloak. His black peaked hat had a fringe almost in woman fashion which dangled past his ears and shrouded his face so that I could hardly see it. With his mumbled greeting he sidled up and dropped to the bench beside me, peering past me at Dora as though he were infinitely more interested in her rather than me which was not in itself a surprising fact.

"Yes," I agreed. Dora and I sat up and shifted reluctantly to give him room. The little figure ten feet away, stood impassive. I recall that I stared with a sudden startled astonishment; and then with a vague shudder stabbing into me. The silent shape was no more than five feet tall, so that with a quick glance here in the dimness one might have thought it a half grown boy. A man's long black overcoat fell from the top of its head almost to the ground, as though a boy had the overcoat hung on his head, with all of him shrouded inside it. But the top of the overcoat was limp, sagging. I had the sudden crazy thought that the thing was headless—an overcoat hanging on wide square shoulders without any head above them!

I shuddered involuntarily.

"You and the young lady like music?" the man beside me was saying. "It is romantic. You are engaged maybe? Or honeymooning?" His voice was almost too solicitous.

Between the shrouding fringe of his hat the colored tubelight sheen gleamed on his partly shrouded face. It was pallid, hawk-nosed, with burning dark eyes that still were staring with an almost rude intentness at Dora.

"No," I said. I moved with an impulse to stand up and take Dora to another bench, but the man's hand reached out and touched my arm.

"Just a minute," he said in his limping guttural voice. "My name is Bragg. What is yours?"

"Ralston," I said stiffly. "Thomas Ralston."

I could see that Dora now was staring at that little lurking figure. She, too, sensed that there was something gruesome about it.

The man beside me was speaking more swiftly now in a low furtive flow of mumbled words. "I can interest young lovers like you. I have a place, just for honeymooners. A little colony of lovers. A place to live, without cost, and no work. You would like it. A very beautiful place."

"We're not married," I said. Was this weird fellow a solicitor for some rich man's altruistic colony? I had heard of such places. In my father's day there was a big one on an island off the Florida coast, and another in the South Seas—colonies where newlyweds went to create an earthly paradise, which, of course, wouldn't work out.

"But you will be married?" the man insisted. "It is a very beautiful place. There is no place like it. I am sure Miss Franklin will—"

I tensed, jumped to my feet, and Dora stood up beside me. Miss Franklin! But I hadn't named her. This fellow knew us then. At our movement, it seemed that the little figure nearby was edging closer. I am a pretty husky, six foot fellow. As I stood up, the man on the bench rose also, with his hand still on my arm. He was about my height. I flung off his light hold.

"Not interested," I said. "Come on, Dora."

We started to go.

Was that damnable, headless little thing about to pounce on me? There were five hundred people here within sound of a shout, but despite it a thrill of fear darted through me. I'm not exactly afraid of anything human; but somehow this seemed different—as though that square, box-like, wide-shouldered little thing were something gruesome—something you couldn't fight with your fists. It was standing sidewise to us now, in a deeper shadow than before and, even more than before, I got the impression that the ominous-looking little figure was headless.

"But won't you at least come and see what I have to show you?" the man at my side was insisting. "It is not very far—"



"Thanks, no." I turned away with an arm around Dora. And suddenly the man was slinking off with the wide-shouldered little thing following after him on stiff little legs. In a moment they were gone.

THAT was the beginning. The details of me are not important here; I need only say that I was twenty-four that summer. Dora and I were engaged to be married. Both of us were orphans. She was wealthy; I was not, so that I did not want to marry until I had made a success of an invention on which I was working—a ray-weapon with which I hoped, not to make war more deadly, but to make war impossible. It was a non-killing, paralyzing vibration. In theory, if I could project it any great distance—a vibration on speeding form—then with it whole armies would be stricken down, rendered helpless.

But I had not progressed that far as yet. I was living in Dora's home, working in a small laboratory with which it was equipped. Just this week I had completed a miniature projector. With tests upon animals it seemed to be effective at some fifty feet. . . .

Dora's home was some three miles out in the country from the Crossroads Municipal Village where we had gone to hear the music. We took her little air-roller which was parked nearby. We did not fly it for such a short distance, merely rolled it out on the State Road. Dora was frightened, but I tried to shrug away the mysterious incident.

"That—that little thing that stood watching us," she said. "Oh Tom—"

"Looked like a boy with an overcoat over his head," I told her. "Forget it, Dora."

Had she noticed that the man who had accosted us knew her name? She did not mention it, nor did I. We were approaching her home within five minutes. Here, fifty miles north of New York City, there was one of the infrequent patches of lonely country. Her small cement and metal cottage nestled against a wooded hillside. Queer—as we rolled up, the house was in complete darkness. Yet Mrs. Holten, our housekeeper, certainly would not have retired now at ten o'clock.

We stopped at the main entrance and

climbed out. "Oh Tom—" Dora murmured. "Something very strange about this—"

She stood clinging to me, with the dark silent house beside us. Overhead the moon was riding a sky of low, swift-flying clouds. The trees around the house stirred with a night breeze, but beyond that it seemed that everything was abnormally silent—a silence hanging menacingly around us.

"Mrs. Holten must have gone to bed," I said. "Come on, let's go in."

But Mrs. Holten wasn't in the house. We called; then lighted all the lights. The place was in perfect order, but the housekeeper was gone.

"Strange," I said. "I suppose something called her away. She should have left us a note."

But what I didn't say was that on the wall of the hall, near the door of the laboratory there were dark marks on the plaster—marks that suggested a burn, as though heat had struck the wall.

"Tom, come here," Dora called from the living room. "What a queer smell!"

I met her frightened gaze; her nostrils were dilating. I could smell it—an acrid, pungent smell.

*"Government Food Depot Raided!"* The crisp low voice here with us in the living room was so unexpected that Dora gave a low scream and clutched me. It was our news-radio which Mrs. Holten had evidently left on; and now a news announcement was being made. *"Allenville, New York. Mysterious raiders broke into the Government Surplus Food Depot, here tonight—probably about 9.50 p.m. Large supplies of sealed cooked food stolen. Four watchmen found dead—others missing."*

Dora and I stood stricken, listening to the newscaster's droning voice. Allenville was the Municipal Housing Village we had just left. The Government Food Storehouses were on its other side half a mile from where we had heard the music.

*"... and the bodies of the watchmen show that they were attacked by some mysterious weapon. There are no wounds. The clothing is charred a little, as though some weird form of heat were applied. Two of the men have burned spots on the*

*forehead—as though some electric charge of a lethal power—”*

The signal lights on top of our instrument showed that another public-news station was signalling it had a visual broadcast of immediate interest. I reached and tuned to it. The televisior glowed. Numbed with startled horror, Dora and I stood staring at the moving image on the televisior grid. It was from a public observer lens mounted on a pole beside one of the roads leading out of Allen-ville. An alarm signal had been turned in by a traffic director there on a crossing ramp. He had evidently flung on the alarm-light so that all the scene was bathed in its white actinic glare. And the roadside observing lens was bringing it now to us, broadcasting it to every receiving set in the country.

What we saw was the crossing ramp with milling, frightened pedestrians and the traffic in a tangle. Momentarily the people were blinded by the glare and deafened by the shrieking of the alarm-siren. In the background loomed a building which I knew was another of the Government Food Depots. The alarm evidently had originated there.

“Tom—look—that doorway!” Dora murmured.

From one of the dark doorways of the Food Depot a little figure came scurrying out. And then another—and at the foot of the ramp where the crowd was milling, several others suddenly were visible. Figures identical with the one which had watched us by the bench!

“Oh Tom—dear God!”

For a brief instant one of them was bathed in the alarm-light and our image of the turmoil showed it clearly. The shrouding garment was open in front as it faced us. The scurrying little thing was headless! It seemed to have square wide shoulders, straight across from tip to tip—no neck—no head! The glimpse was ended in another second as the thing darted away and was gone in the turmoil.

In our living room, Dora and I stood stricken. And suddenly our room tube-light was extinguished and we were plunged into darkness! There was just the moonlight glow from one of the living room's open windows—a pallid rectangle where now I saw a weird box-like thing

lurching as it climbed over the sill!

A little automatic bullet-projector for home emergency use was hanging on a rack beside me. I snatched it. The disintegrating air-charge hurled the bullet with an almost soundless whizz. My aim doubtless was true enough; but from the oncoming little creature a faint violet radiance was streaming out, like an enveloping aura around it, visible now in the darkness. The bullet melted with a soundless little puff of light.

I was aware that Dora was clutching at me, screaming. Then something hit us with a numbing electric shock. I was conscious of nothing save that I was falling; galvanized so that I went down rigid, with a crash. Then there was only Dora's scream of terror, swiftly fading as my senses were flung away.

**I** CAME to myself with the sense that a considerable time had passed. I knew that I was thinking. For a while it seemed that there was nothing of me alive, except my mind. I was conscious now that my body was numb; lifeless.

Like catalepsy. It was a consciousness most horrible—dead, yet alive. I struggled to move, but there was nothing that would react. Then very slowly I could feel the sensation of tingling. It seemed to define my body; make me conscious of my legs and arms that were prickling as though with a thousand needles stabbing them. I could feel now that I was lying on something soft. My eyelids fluttered up so that I had the swimming vision of narrow metal walls and a low grid ceiling. The room was faintly luminous with a weird dull radiance.

Then my clearing sight focused on a lens-shaped window. Stars were out there—glittering points of blue-white light in a firmament solid black. The stars were in a slow circular procession of movement so that I knew the room was revolving.\*

Interplanetary Space. I was in a space-vehicle. I could hear the faint, throbbing humming mechanisms now, and see the endless procession of celestial glory outside my window. Numbly, for how long I do not know, I lay blankly watching it. The space-vehicle obviously had a slow horizontal axial rotation. The glittering distant worlds swung past. And then I

saw the Earth! The blazing, flame-enveloped ball of Sun was off to one side, so that it was a great crescent Earth. Much time indeed had passed. Hours; days—a blank to me. The Earth was dull red-yellow. The sunlight gleamed on the mountains at the limb of its crescent; and I could see the mottling of clouds and the configurations of oceans and continents beneath them.

"Maybe you can move now. Your name is Tom Ralston, isn't it? Any chance you can speak—you're coming out all right, damned if you're not. I'd about given you up."

It was a low voice beside me; and suddenly I was aware of a hunched man's form sitting here on the floor. My gaze swung to see him—a slim young fellow in ragged Earth garments of tight black and white striped trousers and white blouse open at the throat. His face was good-looking; slack-jawed, weak face with pale blue eyes. His stubble of beard made his weak chin and thin cheeks bluish. He was smiling.

"All right now, Ralston?"

"Yes, I guess so." I could barely mouth it. My tongue was thick; all my body was a torture now from that pricking. But I could move, and every moment I could feel my strength coming back to me. "Where am I?" I mumbled. "What happened? Who are you?" And then I remembered Dora. "She—Dora Franklin—she was with me. Is she all right?"

"Oh sure. If you could call being on this damned ship anything to be pleased about. The woman Setta is taking care of her. The damned little Physical hit her and you both with its shock, but you got much the worst. Dora's all right, now."

I lay, with my strength coming back, listening in mute wonderment to the weird things he was telling me. His name was Johnny Blair. A year ago, in New York City, he had just been married. He and his young wife had been approached by that same weird man who had accosted Dora and me. They had yielded to his lure of a honeymoon paradise; had gone with him. The man's name was Bragg—an escaped Earth criminal, member of a band of fifty who in a wholesale jail-break five years ago had gotten loose,

stolen a space-vehicle and left Earth. Roaming in Space, they had landed on a little planetoid, a member of our Solar System, which encircles the Sun in an orbit outside the orbit of Earth; between the Earth and Mars.

"We're almost there now," young Blair was saying. He had lowered his voice so that now he was furtive, fearing that what he was telling me might be overheard by someone outside our cubby. "Pretty weird new world we're headed for, Ralston," he commented grimly. He jerked his thumb toward the lens-shaped pressure window. "If you're strong enough to take a look, you'll see it right under us. We're dropping down into its stratosphere now."

With his arm supporting me, weakly I staggered to the window. Blair was explaining that our tiny cubby was on the outer rim of the flat, disc-shaped vehicle. Its rocket-streams gave it a slow horizontal rotation, and its gravity plates, set now into repulsion, were slowly dropping it downward.

Through the window I stared down. The little planetoid, some six hundred miles in diameter but with an immense density since it was almost solid metal, lay spread close beneath us. A weird world indeed; a great spread of convex surface of barren, tumbled rocks and mountains in great serrated tiers. The sunlight gleamed with a dazzling sheen on the burnished heights. Then we passed into the shadow of night.

**I** GAZED, wordless. It was a fearsome, barren waste of blue-white metal rocks, fused and pitted as though the little world had been born in a fiery convulsion; a tumbled, strewn land of crags and boulders with ragged gashes of canyons in which now the shadows were black, impenetrable. And over it all there was a lurid green-red glow. It seemed inherent to the air; and it streamed up like a radioactive aura from the rocks of the ground.

"The whole planetoid is like that?" I murmured. "Surely that's not habitable?"

Johnny Blair rubbed his bluish stubble of beard. "Well, there's water—it rains sometimes. Maybe there's soil where things would grow, but I've never seen any. There's quite a colony of us humans here now. We've been stealing our food—"

So that explained the raids on the Government Food Depots! A band of fifty escaped criminals, fugitives from Earth, originally had come here. Their leader was one Torkine; the pallid fellow Bragg was his lieutenant. And now, raiding Earth of food and supplies, married couples were being brought—and young men and young girls, to be married on the planetoid. A new world.

"We've brought some young people from Mars also," Johnny Blair was explaining. "Been there three times, and once to Venus. Quite a lot of humans here now—four hundred maybe."

To colonize an uninhabitable world. I said something like that and Johnny stared at me mutely. "It was inhabited," he said grimly. He seemed to shudder. "A world with just one inhabitant. It—it's a ghastly thing. It's got us all as its prisoners now. The Supreme One—that's what it calls itself. God, when you see it—"

What weird horrible thing was this? I could only return his stare. A barren little planetoid, with just one inhabitant. Something not human.

"But," I stammered, "when Bragg accosted us, there was a little headless thing in an overcoat standing near him. And we saw several of them coming out of the Food Depots."

Johnny's smile was grim. "We call those the Physicals. They're parts of the Supreme One—like his arms and legs, only they're detached."

"Part of him? His arms and legs? I don't get you."

"No? Well, my God, you'll see." Johnny's gesture seemed trying to express his hopelessness at explaining. "You'll see him—the main central part of him, I mean, that never leaves his house. He's a Being, not all in one piece, like us humans. His housed main body can't move. You understand? He's rooted to the ground. The rest of him is detached and he works it by remote control. There must be thousands of those little Physicals—some in one shape, some in others. But mostly they're like the ones you saw."

A new form of life. A Thing, an Individual—the sole occupant of its world. My mind tried to encompass it. On Earth, every living creature at least seems to be, as Johnny expressed it, all in one

piece. But why should that be exclusively necessary throughout the Universe? Here, on this little remote planetoid, was one of God's creations that was made wholly different.

Johnny's voice went lower. "He—it—the Supreme One—it's got us all trapped. It's delighted—having something besides parts of itself to rule. You see? That's why it's been sending its parts—like it's arms and legs—to make Bragg and the others lure young men and girls. To establish a human world, and the Supreme One will rule it."

I understood it better now. That headless little thing in the overcoat had been watching Bragg—a moving part of the Supreme One, making Bragg do its bidding. And now Johnny was explaining that as though it were a giant electric eel, the headless Physical could emit from its own body a weird electronic discharge. That was what had shocked me into catalepsy. And it had thrown a barrage about itself, so that my bullet had been futile to hit it.

"These Physicals," I was murmuring. "Can they hear you when you speak? Can they talk?"

He nodded. "Yes. Subsidiary organs that operate for themselves when the main body is too remote." Again he shrugged hopelessly. "I guess we humans aren't capable of fully understanding—"

HE checked himself suddenly. He and I were still standing by the little bull's-eye window. Behind us I heard a click. A doorslide to our cubby opened. I sucked in my breath with a gasp. One of the Physicals stood there. A little square, box-like thing mounted on two jointed legs, with flexible hinged feet, long and pointed. The light from an outside corridor was behind it, so that I could at first only see its outline in silhouette. As it stood, it seemed to click and a third leg came sliding down to support it like a tripod. Its arms, three on each side of its box-body, were waving like little tentacles. Ghastly little living thing. Its box-body was some two feet wide by three feet long, with perhaps a foot of thickness. The light gleamed on its top edge; the foot-thick surface there was level, smooth and shining, with rounded ends

gruesomely to suggest a travesty of human shoulders.

And then it spoke—a low, hollow, tonelessly mechanical voice. “You have recovered? You are the human called Tom Ralston?”

English! Queerly intoned, but correct. Johnny nudged me. “Yes,” I said. “That’s who I am.”

Its third leg slid up again into its body; and with padding little steps it came forward. I could see it better now. Was it clothed? Was it living tissue, or wholly metal? For a moment there seemed no answers. Then I realized that there was no detachable clothing. A body of animal tissue, or mineral? Perhaps both. Perhaps neither. A substance different. But I could see that parts of it were rigid, and parts of it quivering. Down the front of its square little body rows of knobs protruded; and as I stared, one of them shifted aside and a little knife-like finger came out on a tentacle arm and waved at me. Then I saw what might have been called its face—a mobile, flexible-looking circular area in the front center of its body. A hole there seemed to glow as though an eye were in it. A round orifice from which the voice issued was on one side of it; and on the other, a hole that could have been an ear. And over them there was a crescent-shaped little area which was greenly luminous—the little brain in there, visibly palpitating.

“I told Torkine,” the Physical said, “that he might see you when you recovered. Blair will bring you now.” Its feet turned. With little precision steps it marched out and vanished in the dim corridor.

I stared at Johnny, and now suddenly he gripped me. “We’ll have to go,” he murmured swiftly. “Listen, we’ll be landing in an hour or two—this may be the last chance I have to talk to you alone. I been tryin’ to get away from this accursed thing for six months now. Escape—I want to get back to Earth.”

“And you couldn’t?”

“Good God, no. Wait ’til you understand the—monster better. It’s got all us humans trapped. Helpless. Sometimes it treats us kindly—it’s got its own ideas about building up a world of humans, for it to rule. But when you make it mad,

the wrath of the monster is horrible!”

His words were making me shudder. “You have a wife,” I murmured. “Where is she?”

“She’s dead,” he said. His voice went drab. “Eight months ago, by Earth-time, I guess it was. She—she displeased the Supreme One, and so it killed her. Four of the Physicals just—just grabbed her arms and legs and they pulled until she—she came apart!”

His voice trailed away. I could only stand with my hand on his shoulder, staring mutely at him as I shuddered. Then he was leading me along the corridor which ran like the spoke of a wheel toward the center of the disc-shaped vehicle.

“What I was saying,” he went on in his swift murmur. “Torkine and those fifty men of his convict band—I wouldn’t trust a damn one of them. The monster likes Torkine, so he’s the boss of us humans. But Torkine is planning something murderous. I’ve been sure of that for quite a while. And this fellow Bragg is married to a girl we got from Mars. Her name’s Setta. She’s all right.”

His voice sank even lower as he stopped in the corridor and gripped me. “Listen, I’ve seen your girl Dora—Setta’s been taking care of her. I hope the Supreme One decides to marry you to her. But I wouldn’t count on it. I’ve seen Torkine and Bragg both lookin’ at her pretty queer. She’s a damn sweet-lookin’ girl.”

My heart was pounding. “Johnny, look here; you say you want to escape, get back to Earth?”

“That’s what I was tellin’ you. Or to Mars—that would be all right. Setta and I are planning it. Can’t tell you now. She loves Bragg, and wants to get him out of here. Bragg has been punished by the monster.”

“Johnny, listen. When we get to the planetoid, I want to be in with you—Dora and I.”

“Yes. That’s what I guessed. Suits me fine. But I’m tellin’ you—don’t you trust a damn soul!”

**T**HE weird passions of humans. Here on this little space-vehicle we all were captives of the Supreme One. And yet, wherever there are humans, smoldering strife will exist. The criminal Torkine

and his fifty men—what murderous action were they planning? We passed one of them in the corridor; a big, beetle-browed fellow in trousers and shirt. He stood with his hands on his hips, staring after us with a grinning leer. But he moved quickly enough when a little Physical came marching up with its hurried, jerky little steps and ordered him away.

At the entrance to the small control tower which projected up like the hub of a wheel from the center of the disc-vehicle, Bragg was standing.

"So they got you and your girl?" he murmured.

"Yes," I agreed.

I stared at the woman who was beside him. Setta, his wife, the girl from Mars. She was a small, brown-skinned girl of perhaps twenty. An odd face with slanted eyes, narrow nose and queerly pointed chin. Long sleek black hair framed her face, fell over her brown, sleek bare shoulders and crossed her full breasts to make a sort of bodice. From her waist a fringed brown skirt hung to her bare ankles.

Strange-looking young woman of another world from mine. But as she smiled at me, revealing even white teeth, I felt her charm, and almost at once my sense of her strangeness was gone. At least we were both humans, a man and a woman, with so vast a gulf between us and the gruesome little Physicals.

"I have tried to be good to your woman Dora," Setta said as I passed her.

"Yes, thank you," I responded.

The Control Turret was pallid with overhead starlight. Its big circular glass windows showed me the spread of the planetoid's barren surface underneath us. We had dropped down through cloud layers now. The wild naked wastes of the little world's surface were no more than ten thousand feet down. Still there seemed nothing but barren metal rocks; no sign of life human or otherwise.

"So you did not die, Tom Ralston. Welcome to our little colony!"

Torkine's ironic voice greeted me. He was seated at the control table where the intricate dials, levers and vacuums of the disc's mechanisms were ranged. He stood up as I entered. And beside him I saw Dora. She was still clad in her Earth garments, and her long pale-blond hair

was braided and coiled on her head. I have not spoken of Dora's beauty. Loving her, my own opinion of it possibly was exaggerated; and yet I have never known a man, or a woman either, who differed greatly from me in praising it—a delicate, ethereal beauty.

She gave a little cry as she saw me, half started to her feet, and then sank back on the bench beside Torkine. Her face was pallid, but she was trying to smile at me.

"Welcome," Torkine said again. "Come sit here with us, Ralston, and I'll show you our new world. You see he did not die, little Dora?"

I saw Torkine now as a huge burly giant; six feet four at least. A swaggering, handsome fellow, this escaped convict. In age he could have been thirty odd. He was grinning at me ironically as he shoved a metal chair toward me.

"The Supreme One will be glad to have you," he added. "You and Dora Franklin. Especially Dora. We need Earth beauty in our motley little colony of humans. The Supreme One spoke to me of that—there will be several marriages soon after we arrive tonight. The Great Master is deciding now which men and which women of our humans shall be mated."

Omnipotence. Torkine's irony was gone now; he spoke casually, as though stating a casual fact. Humans here, who before the power of the Supreme One were no longer individuals to have a will and emotions of their own. Everything to be decided for us.

But I saw the pallid hawknosed Bragg staring at Dora with a look that made my heart pound. And Torkine himself dropped back on the bench and murmured:

"Do not be surprised little Dora, if the Master decides not to give you to this fellow Ralston—"

He leered at me, and his arms went around Dora, drawing her to him. She gave a little cry of terror and repugnance. It was too much for me. I jumped up.

"Stop that!" I rasped. "You Torkine—take your hands off her!"

He turned his head, grinning at me, but he did not move. I would have been upon him in another second. Behind me I heard Johnny Blair give a cry to try and stop me. In the shadows of one of the circular



walls, half a dozen of the little box-like Physicals, all identical, were ranged motionless in a line. They were muttering now—weird mutterings that popped from them like tiny explosions. And abruptly acting in unison, they came pouncing at me!

“RALSTON, stand still!” Blair shouted. “Your only chance—stand still!”

I checked my advance and tried to get my wits; to master the frenzy that was upon me. It was a moment of horrible chaos; I knew that my life or death in that second hung in the balance. With hands at my sides I stood irresolute as the weird little creatures spread out and surrounded me. Little creatures? Still my brain would barely encompass the amazing fact that these were not individual little beings but merely the detached parts of one great Individual—one almost Omniscient Mentality. As though they were just arms and legs with a remote giant central Being to guide them in what they were doing now.

As I stood panting, waiting, with my heart pounding, for an instant it seemed that I would be seized, with the tentacle arms of the box-like little things pulling at me, like poor Blair's young wife, with arms and legs pulled until she came apart. . . .

It was a breathless, horrible moment of suspense. All the humans here in the pallid turret stood breathlessly silent, tense, as helplessly we waited to see what the Supreme One would decide to do. By what weird method of nature were swift communications passing between these little things and their main Being so distant? Our human mind doubtless will never yield an answer to that. Yet perhaps it was no different in its essence from the swift orders which our own brain gives to our distant hands and feet. Ours is a transmission through nerves; this other a transmission through the ether. Each of these little parts had its subsidiary eye, to see these local happenings; a little subsidiary brain to record them, to amplify them with reasoning and to fling the result out to the Supreme One for decision.

Thoughts themselves are instant things. I stood with a flood of such thoughts as

the Physicals surged at me. Their little eyes, in the middle of each box-like body, were balefully glaring. A few of the tentacles gripped me. The touch was cold, slimy, yet from it I could feel a current tingling, like a mild electric shock.

Then the gripping fingers in unison relaxed. One of the little hollow voices muttered:

“Tom Ralston, I will punish you later.”

As though suddenly the incident were closed, in unison all the Physicals turned, and with their hurried little precision steps marched back to the wall where they lined themselves up, motionless, silent, with only their eyes alert.

And from the bench where still his arm encircled the shuddering Dora, the giant Torkine was grinning at me with a leer of triumph.

The huge disc which was the spaceship dropped lower into the dark night of the weird little planetoid. For a brief time I sat at one of the control turret windows, staring down over the rim of the disc at the barren, tumbled surface. We were slowly sailing now hardly a thousand feet above it. Still there was nothing apparent down there save naked crags. But I knew we were nearing our destination. In the dim little corridors which spread out like spokes here from this hub of the disc, distant sounds of activity were audible. A dozen or more of Torkine's men were on board, watched and herded by a score of the little Physicals. This raid on Earth had produced quantities of food which the humans needed to sustain them on the planetoid. There was alcoholite also. I could see that many of Torkine's villainous-looking men were imbibing it. Their faces were flushed; some of them were murmuring to each other, with leering, appraising looks at Dora.

And this raid had produced a few more Earth captives. Young men and girls who were confined in the little cubbies along one of the corridors. Their frightened voices were audible now as the Physicals herded them with preparations to disembark.

“The planetoid world,” Dora abruptly whispered. “Look—there is the city.”

Torkine momentarily had moved away, and Dora had shifted to sit beside me. Together we gazed down. The ragged

mountainous horizon of the sharply convex surface of the little world seemed only a few miles away. And as the disc, dropping still lower, sailed forward, a human settlement came suddenly into view. I had only a brief glimpse of it. At first it was a group of light-dots. Then the colored glow from them disclosed little groups of dwellings. The lights came from their windows, and other glowing tubelights were set on poles in the spaces, like irregular streets between the houses.

It was a weird, motley little settlement. Small, crude, single story dwellings, evidently erected from materials and parts of other houses filched from Earth on previous raids. A hundred little habitations, set in a group.

**T**ORKINE was beside Dora and me now. "Very nice, isn't it?" he said with his ironic smile. "That is for our Earth-people. With nothing here on this planetoid, we have had to do the best we could by bringing everything from Earth. And there to the left is the Martian village. And to the right, our Venus people live."

The two other little house-groups stood a few hundred yards further away, with the weird night-shadows enveloping them. A score perhaps of strangely-fashioned habitations in each of them. A few dozen Martians, living here, captives of this monstrous Thing that ruled here. The spindly, fragile-looking Martian village was almost wholly dark. The Venus group was blue with flickering torchlight which disclosed little mound-shaped houses of wood and stone.

"The nucleus of a new civilization," Torkine was saying. "The Supreme One is proud of it. Earth, Mars and Venus will be blended here in the new race we will produce. And the Great Master will rule and guide us. He chooses our mates. He directs our lives—he even thinks and acts for us, because, you see, we humans are very inferior."

The irony of Torkine's voice made me turn and stare at him. He was grinning at me. But in his dark, deep-set eyes there was something else that smoldered with the glinting reflection of his own thoughts.

"I see," I murmured.

"Well, you don't," he retorted. "But

you soon will. There, to one side—that round thing is where the Supreme One houses himself. See it?"

Figures were visible down in the village now as men and women gathered in the doorways and in the spaces between the houses. They were all staring up at our arriving disc. And everywhere I could see the box-like little Physicals. Some stood like sentries at the street corners. Others were marching with their little precision steps back and forth. My gaze followed Torkine's gesture. To one side, partly between the Earth and the Martian sections of the weird village, a flat cauldron depression of the rocks seemed to have a big circular cover over it. It was a bulging dome-like roof perhaps a hundred feet in diameter.

The house of the Monster. The one thing which was native here. The dome-like roof, of some material which to me was nameless, indescribable, glowed with a weird violent sheen. Its circular outer rim was some ten feet above the ground—ten feet of entrance space. But the violet sheen down there was like a barrage-wall, with slits in it like doorways. Groups of Physicals were standing there on guard.

Our space-disc was settling to a level, rocky, open area just beyond the glow of the village lights. The Physicals here in the turret herded Dora and me away. Torkine, with one of the weird little shapes on each side of him, grimly, silently watching him, was at the bank of controls, landing us.

Dora and I had no chance to see young Johnny Blair again. Nor the Martian woman, Setta. At one of the rim pressure-exits, three of the Physicals stood waiting with us. Then we felt the big disc settle with a bump to the ground. The exit door slid open and our captors pushed us out.

The new world. Its strangely heavy air choked me a little at first, and made my head reel. I could feel that the gravity was less than Earth, but not much so because of the immense density of the planet. A babble of muffled sound was audible as human voices greeted us. In the weird darkness of dim tubelights, a fringe of staring captive humans showed on the rocks nearby. But Physicals like little

policemen paced in front of them, keeping them away.

Along a descending rocky path Dora and I were shoved until in a moment the violet sheen of the barrage at the house of the Monster loomed ahead. Then we went through one of the slit openings under the dome-like roof. And presently we stopped at a luminous waist-high railing; and in a lurid violet-yellow glow, we stared down at the giant thing which was spread here before us!

THE circular area inside here seemed about fifty feet in diameter and was depressed ten feet below us. A violet-yellow luminescence suffused it so that for a moment it was a blur. Then gradually it clarified and we saw the Supreme One! Its flat, intricate body was a quivering, palpitating, luminous mass of tissue spread in a great fifty foot circle. A Thing fifty feet in diameter, and perhaps three feet thick. For a moment I thought that it was lying flat on the rocks. Then I saw that it was suspended a foot or two in the air with a violet curtain or radiance connecting it to the solidity of the ground.

A rooted monster! Incapable of locomotion it spread here, with radiance like roots, through which doubtless it was drawing from the ground its sustenance, its life. Electric sustenance, of course. Weird life-force, animating its nerve-ganglia, replenishing its living tissue. Intricate electronic streams of nourishment which in a human body are blood-streams. A life-force of indescribable chemistry, drawn through its electronic roots from the planet itself.

An amazing Being. Glowing, multiple brain-lobes were like a score of transparent heads with luminous threads of what could have been nerve tissue connecting them; an intricate network of ganglia in a tangle everywhere through the palpitating body-tissue. Other organs, indescribable, unnamable, were crimson and violet glowing blobs. I could see the streams of nourishment swiftly circulating from one to the other—huge transparent arteries of fluorescence, threading out into veins and tiny capillaries. And in the center of the body-mass, a giant eye on a flexible stem, huge organ of sight with spectral

colors darting like fire within it, was glaring at us.

All that I saw with my first swift awed gaze. Then other details were apparent. A dozen globes of what could have been transparent muscle were rhythmically palpitating, like huge hearts pumping the strange current through this Thing to keep it alive. And then I saw that under the central giant eye there was the orifice for a voice and another for hearing.

An awesome rooted monster. The only living thing on its barren little world until the humans came, a pseudo-solidity of roof and walls; a radiance which streamed from the monster itself. And now in the lurid dimness I could see faint streams like the threads of an aura emanating from the different sections of the monster. Little cables of vibrations, infinitely long, perhaps as unsubstantial as a human thought. In the darkness here beside Dora and me, a dozen of the little Physicals were ranged. Parts of the monster. I saw it now—saw those evanescent threadlike streams from the circle of quivering tissue—each thread ending in one of the Physicals. The pathways of transmission for orders from the central Being to its seemingly detached physical parts.

Thoughts are so swift! I suppose Dora and I stood there gazing for no more than a minute. The monster for that minute was silent; the round central eye, as big as my head, gazed with appraisement. I heard Dora suck in her breath with terror as she mutely stared. Both of us, clutching at each other. And a weird feeling swept me. It was as though I was gazing at a living thing of vast immensity. The power of thought here, immense, vast and unfathomable to me who was just a human. It gave me a feeling of my own futility, so that in the presence of this Being I stood cringing. Unutterably helpless; small, and terrified.

And then the Supreme One spoke:

"You have been causing me trouble, Tom Ralston. I should have destroyed you, there on the spaceship."

It was a soft, measured, toneless voice, issuing perhaps from near the giant eye. Yet it had a faraway sound as though blended and muffled by distance. And now I could see that one of the brain-lobes near us had been stimulated into

action greater than the others. The luminous aura from it had intensified. Beneath its membrane tissue, like a million luminous little snakes writhing one upon the other, the brain-folds were in motion. This, then, was the brain-lobe concerned with us now; the lobe from which the thing had learned English; had learned indeed, that there were other living things in the Universe besides Itself.

"Speak, human!" the monster said suddenly.

"Yes," I stammered. "Should have—killed me—yes."

"But I have not many humans here. Perhaps I shall kill you. Perhaps I shall marry you to this human you call Dora. I have not yet decided."

I HAD thought that Dora and I were standing by a railing. But like the rest of this dwelling it was a barrage barrier. I could see its outlines quivering in front of me; feel its repellent force so that if I had taken a step forward it would shove me back.

Beside Dora and me now, Torkine had appeared. He stood gazing down at Dora. His face, with the lurid glow on it, was grinning. And suddenly the Supreme One said:

"You, Torkine, you tell me you knew this girl many of your years ago?"

"Yes, Master. Oh, yes," Torkine said ingratiatingly.

Knew Dora years ago? That was news to me.

"I shall think of it," the monster said. "There are several marriages for me to perform presently in your Earth, and Mars and Venus fashions. I need more humans here. You, Tom Ralston—have they told you my purpose?"

"No," I said.

"We shall have a human world here for me to rule. A little world of blended Mars and Venus and Earth. And then we will spread. The parts of Me will go abroad to this great planet and that one, conquering! Conquering everything, until at last I shall master the entire Universe!"

Torkine was chuckling. I stood gripping Dora and my thoughts swung to young Johnny Blair. He had some plan with the woman Setta to escape from here.

To me now it seemed a thing utterly hopeless.

And suddenly I shuddered, with a new stab of terror. Could this monstrous Being read our human thoughts? Apparently not, for its voice said sharply:

"For why do you chuckle, Torkine?"

"I was thinking of that fellow Bragg," Torkine responded, "who did his work so badly on this last voyage to Earth. We brought only fifteen more humans, Master."

"I am bringing Bragg here to see me and talk to him more closely," the monster said. "You, Tom Ralston, and you, Dora Franklin—that is all I wish of you now. You will learn my decision soon."

Threadlike streams from one of the brain-lobes of the monster were swaying past me; and as I turned, I saw a dozen little Physicals attached to the faintly luminous threads—Physicals who came marching in with Bragg among them—Bragg, more pallid than ever with his hawk-face contorted by terror. Torkine stood aside, still chuckling. Then Physicals were surrounding Dora and me, herding us away. We stumbled back through the luminous darkness; along a little path. It was no more than a hundred feet until the outlines of a small house—loomed before us. A voice from one of the Physicals said:

"You go inside and wait for my decision." A miniature of the monster's central voice. I realized now that all the Physicals spoke with the same voice, in miniature.

"All right," I said. "You'll have no trouble with us, Master."

The dim room was crudely furnished with Earth furniture. I sat the trembling Dora on a couch; dropped beside her with my arm around her.

"Weird, Dora," I whispered it. "But don't be too frightened. We'll find a way out of this."

In the shadows two figures suddenly were moving! Then I saw that they were the Martian woman, Setta, and young Johnny Blair. They came forward.

"The Physicals all went outside?" Johnny murmured.

"Yes," I agreed. "Good Lord, that weird monster—can it hear us, if we whisper like this?"

"No. Safe enough, in here now."

THE room had the door through which we had entered, and two windows. Both were open. In the glowing dimness outside we could see other Physicals ranged in a line, watching us.

"The house is surrounded," Johnny whispered. "No way of getting out—any break would be instant death. But a little later, when they're getting ready for the marriages there's just a desperate chance. There's generally a hundred Physicals guarding the spaceship, but not so many tonight, if they are needed other places. Did he take Bragg in there?"

"Yes," I agreed. "Bragg looked pretty frightened. Good Lord, if that damned monster ever gets really angry—"

The words brought a terrified cry from Setta. "If only Bragg will be brought here to us," she murmured. "I think I can get us outside to watch the marriages. The Master has never been angry at me. And once we are outside with a chance to run for the ship—"

Futile, desperate plans. But they were all we could devise. We huddled now on the sofa, waiting for Bragg. All of us were unarmed. Even if we had been armed, of what use would a knife or a bullet-weapon be against this multiple monster? A thing impregnable to human attack. . . .

Then I was questioning Dora about that strange thing the Supreme One had said—that Torkine had known her many years ago.

"After my father and mother died," Dora was telling me now, "before I met you, Tom, I lived in that home with my uncle. Mrs. Holten was our housekeeper."

Dora had always seemed reticent about her young girlhood; I had known her only about a year. When she was about twelve, her uncle had been working to give the secret of spaceflight to the world. It was he who had, in secret, constructed the space-disc. Dora had known about it only vaguely; and had been warned to keep secret what little she knew. Torkine had been her uncle's assistant; and him, as a little girl, she had hated and feared.

"He—she tried to kiss me one day," she was telling us now. "You, Tom—you understand? It terrified me so that I

screamed, and then my uncle came and I told him."

Torkine had been discharged by her uncle; and later her uncle had heard that he was in prison. Then there was the jailbreak, and shortly after that her uncle's experimental ship, and himself also, had vanished.

"He stole the ship, and killed your uncle?" I murmured.

"Yes. He told me that, while we were coming here."

I COULD understand so much more of this weird thing now! It was no chance that had directed Bragg to Dora and me as we sat listening to the concert. Torkine had sent him to lure us to some spot where we could be seized without creating an alarm. And it wasn't chance which enabled us to be attacked in Dora's home. Torkine knew where her home was located.

"Was it Bragg, or Torkine himself who came with the Physicals and caught us?" I demanded.

"Torkine," she said. "He told me they killed Mrs. Holten just before we arrived."

My mind leaped back. . . . My little laboratory there in which I had just completed the small ray-weapon. The paralyzing ray. In our frightened haste when we had arrived and found Mrs. Holten gone, I had glanced into the laboratory, but had not thought of my ray-model. Had Torkine forced Mrs. Holten to tell her what work was being done there? She knew about the weapon. Had Torkine taken it?

The little brown-skinned, brown-clad Martian girl, Setta, was at one of the windows now, standing there with Johnny; and they motioned us silently to come. The guarding Physicals on this side of the house had drawn back a little, but still we could see them, a line of gruesome motionless shapes. Their eyes glowed like points of fire in the darkness. Behind them there was a dark area of open rocks between the house of the monster and the Earth Village. Humans were moving about, always with little groups of Physicals guarding them.

The bustle of activity out there was growing. For half an hour past we had been aware of the sound of men's voices;

the voices of girls, sometimes laughing, sometimes with little cries of terror.

"Look," Johnny murmured. "The dais for the wedding couples. They're lighting it."

Earth tubelights, with batteries attached, were glowing now, mounted on the rocks. Their colored radiance illumined a small ledge of rock like a little natural dais which faced the glowing house of the monster. And now we saw a group of Earthmen gathered near the dais. Torkine's original band of criminals. Some had jugs in their hands from which occasionally they drank. Alcoholite, I had no doubt. There were some twenty of them, with others occasionally joining them. Their muttering laughter floated to us.

Johnny Blair bent toward me. "Something going on among those fellows—look at that."

A group of Earthgirls were passing the dais, herded toward its entrance steps by a line of Physicals. Some of the roistering men reached for the girls as they went by. The Physicals with popping anger checked them. The half-drunken men desisted. Some jibed at the girls with coarse comment; but others muttered to themselves—low, defiant curses. I felt myself shuddering. There was smoldering revolt out there. Torkine's men, inflamed now by the alcoholite so that what for a long time they and their leader might have been planning, they now forgot to disguise. It was as though here were a little spark trembling above a pit of horrible explosive—a spark which at any moment might hurl us all to death.

"They've never been like this before," Johnny muttered anxiously. "By Heaven, if the Physicals turn on them, and on us—"

"If only Bragg would come," Setta murmured.

A scream out in the night made her words die in her throat. A man's scream of agony, blood-curdling with its ghastly shrillness. And Setta, here in the dim room with us, echoed it.

"Bragg!"

It sounded again, mingled now with the hissing, popping little voices of the Physicals. Gruesome, ghastly tragedy being enacted now within the House of the Supreme One! Bragg's screams were hor-

rible, but brief. All in a moment they were dying into terrible agonized moans—Bragg's tortured death in the grip of the angered multiple monster.

And suddenly the frenzied little Setta was rushing from us to the room-door.

"No!" Johnny shouted. "Come back!"

We jumped for her but she eluded us; rushed out. And then we saw her outside for just a brief, horrible glimpse. A group of Physicals rushed at her; seized her, but she fought them. And then suddenly they were pulling at her. Little box-like parts of the great monster with an inhuman, incredible strength . . . pulling at her arms and her legs . . . like Johnny Blair's young wife. . . .

I seized Dora, pressed her head against my side. "Don't look, Dora. Dear God!"

I could not look myself after a moment.

"I am ready for you now, Dora Franklin." Physicals were here in the room with us, advancing upon Dora! The voice of one of them crisply added:

"Come with me, Dora Franklin."

Even with what I had seen and heard outside, I tensed to resist. But I came to my senses as Johnny tremblingly seized me, and Dora screamed:

"No! No, Tom!"

Then the Physicals had taken her from me. Three or four of them remained here in the room with Johnny and me; the others herded Dora away. Then from the window we saw her as they led her to the dais. Torkine's men called at her with coarse, drunken comment as she went past them.

And now the House of the Monster was opening. The radiant barrage which had formed its walls and roof slowly dissolved so that the huge, weird Being was exposed. Giant glowing thing spread there on the rocks. Its big central eye appraisingly roved the weird night-scene. And then its hollow, toneless, central voice was intoning names. The men and girls whom now it was to marry.

". . . and Karl Torkine to Dora Franklin, both of Earth. And Sela Sirran, Mars, to Irene Jarrod, of Earth."

Slaves, matched and mated by the decisions of the Great Master.

Then I saw the big figure of Torkine. The colored tubelight gleamed on his leering face as with his arm around the trem-



bling Dora he led her up onto the marriage dais and faced the glowing spread of the Supreme One.

IT was a fantastic, weird ceremony. The varicolored tubelights gleamed down upon the couples who stood ranged along the front edge of the dais. Men and women of three great planets, facing the gruesome multiple monster which here on its own little world was Omnipotent. Its toneless voice was droning now with the ritual it had devised; and at intervals, trained by the Physicals, the couples on the dais bowed, gestured and then knelt with foreheads to the ground in supplication and homage to the Supreme One. Little grey-skinned Venus girls in their gaudy robes; brown-skinned, black-haired young women of Mars; the Earth-girls and young men.

But I had eyes only for Dora, as she knelt with the big Torkine beside her. The light gleamed on her long, pale-blonde hair which fell in great gleaming ripples over her shoulders. Then she and Torkine and the others stood up; and I saw her terrified face.

At the window Johnny and I stood breathless. Watching us, Physicals were ranged across the dim room behind us. I had no thought of them. Helpless, utterly despairing now, I stood gazing out at the weird, eerie night-scene. The group of Torkine's men still gathered at the back of the dais. Their muttering voices mingled with the drone of the Supreme One. Abruptly my heart leaped. One or two of the drunken men had started to climb to the dais. And one suddenly called:

"Why wait, Torkine? Why—"

Like a spark in gunpowder. The Supreme One's voice droned on; but one of the Physicals jumped and jerked the man from the dais. It made a commotion off there. Two others of Torkine's men reached and plucked at the flowing robe of a Venus girl. The man being married to her turned with an oath, jumped and dealt a blow with his fist. There was a scuffle, and the Venus man was pulled down from the dais.

Suddenly there was a milling, spreading chaos. In a fringe at the edge of the light-sheen the spread of rocks was filled with

a watching, motley crowd of humans from the three little villages. I saw the crowd wavering; the front ranks pressing backward and those behind shoving forward, trying to see better.

Like fire in prairie grass the milling movement widened. Human voices shouting in terror, and in drunken anger. Darting little Physicals, with popping, commanding voices. Then one of the Physicals emitted a flash. A man screamed and dropped.

"Tom— Oh, look at Torkine!" I was aware that Johnny was gripping me. Up on the dais in the midst of the commotion the big figure of Torkine was standing motionless. His left arm was around Dora who in terror sagged against him. The light revealed clearly his pale, handsome face, and I saw again that leering, triumphant smile. And now his right hand was fumbling under his flaring, gaudy jacket.

Perhaps the monster itself in that instant was startled at the magnitude of this human commotion. The droning central voice abruptly ceased. In the room behind me I was aware that the Physicals had darted back through the doorway and gone outside. And on the dais the leering, triumphant Torkine suddenly brought his right hand from under his jacket. He was leveling a weapon! My ray-gun! My paralyzing vibration-projector!

This, then, was what Torkine had been planning! This was what had inspired drunken boldness among his men! Torkine was leveling it now at the glowing, quivering spread of the Supreme One!

In that tense, breathless second I was aware that Johnny and I were leaning out over the sill of the window, numbly staring. And then Torkine fired my vibration-gun! Its hissing, infra-red bolt spat down into the palpitating spread of the great rooted, multiple monster! There was a split-second when it seemed to me as though all the world hung breathless, pregnant with expectancy of horror.

AND the horror came, with a rushing, spreading tumult. Down in the glowing mass of the great circular, flat body there was a little puff of light-flash where the ray vibrations struck. A blow at one of its hearts? It seemed that one of the

blobs of heart-muscle was wildly beating, expanding and lunging. And the central eye was flashing crimson and seeming to split with electric flame.

And now in a flash almost simultaneous with the first shot, its wrath was transmitted to its remote, detached parts. Over all the weird chaotic scene of milling humans, the little Physicals sprang into action. A thousand of them as this multi-membered monster ran amok.

I felt Johnny pulling at me. "Got to get out of here, Tom. It's our last chance!"

"Johnny," I gasped, gripping him. "Got to keep together. Try and get to Dora!"

"Yes; keep away from the Physicals. Good God, Tom!"

Up on the dais Torkine had fired his last futile little bolt, and now he had flung my projector away. He was still holding Dora. Amazement, futility, then terror was on his face as he gazed at the writhing, bellowing monster and then at the wild scene of chaos out on the rocks—the crowd of milling, panic-stricken humans with the little Physicals darting among them. Popping, wrathful, miniature duplicated voices of the Supreme One. Violet-yellow flashes were hissing from the Physicals. The running, milling, screaming humans were falling.

Johnny and I were running, trying to get to the dais. Then we saw that Torkine had lifted Dora in his arms; had leaped down and was running with her over the dark spread of rocks. The lights over the dais abruptly now were extinguished. The dimness of the night sprang around us, hideous with human screams of agony and terror; ghastly with the glares of the little popping bolts and the red-yellow, wrathful glare of the monster.

Where had Torkine gone? We could not see him. We darted sidewise as a group of running men and women with Physicals chasing them swept past. And then again we saw Torkine. He was still carrying Dora, leaping over the rocks, zig-zagging, trying seemingly to reach the space-disc. The dark outlines of it were apparent no more than a hundred feet away.

"No Physicals there!" Johnny gasped.

We slanted our running leaps to head

off Torkine. And suddenly he saw us and jumped to a little rocky butte where he stood leering down at us with his arm holding Dora as she sagged against him. A knife was in his hand now. The red-yellow chaos off to our left glistened on its naked blade. For a second I thought that he would plunge it into Dora's breast.

Then suddenly behind him the little box-bodies of Physicals had appeared. Tentacle arms reached for him so that he dropped Dora. For a second she staggered, slumped and then fell over the little brink. Johnny and I scramblingly caught her; I snatched her in my arms and ran, with Johnny beside me. We reached the dark, space-disc doorway, and I turned to look back. Torkine was wildly slashing at a tentacle arm of a Physical that gripped him. Weird tissue-flesh of the damnable, gruesome thing. The steel knife-blade slid harmlessly on it; and then as he wildly stabbed at a box-like chest, the knife-blade broke. He screamed with a last agonized, throat-splitting cry as the plucking little things tumbled him from the rock and engulfed him. . . .

"Tom, there they come! Hurry! Get inside—" Johnny gasped.

We slide the doorslide as a plunging wave of Physicals came and hurled themselves against it. . . .

Then in a moment the big disc was slowly rising. From a bullseye window of the central turret we could see the raging little things as they dropped from the rim of the disc.

The ground slid slowly away beneath us. The sounds were shut off from us now. Mute, ghastly scene. We had only a brief glimpse of the glowing, wrathful monster. It palpitated, quivered in the midst of the carnage. Monster of the planet. Omnipotent ruler here. There were no humans running now. No human bodies were on the rocks. Nothing but crimsoned, noisome fragments with little shapes fighting over them.

The terrible scene in a moment dropped away, blurred and was gone so that there was just starlight here in the turret. The myriad stars of Interplanetary Space. And at the dark, rocky horizon of the planetoid the Earth was just rising, a great mellow crescent, beckoning us.



# THE VIZIGRAPH

**Y**OU'RE invited, all of you, to vizigraph in your messages. Kicks, kudos, bombs and bouquets—our expert operator can take it. All PS asks is that you make your vizigrams helpful and interesting.

Well, the votes are in again, and this time its Conover, Asimov and Hidley, respectively. Incidentally, Mr. Conover received the highest score of any correspondent to date. The lad must have something.

We've had to enlarge the Vizigraph again—this time to ten pages.

## THEY LOVE US!

5359 Raphael St.,  
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Editor:

To give this missile a ten-to-one shot at getting published I'm lifting the formula used by our Brooklyn Buckaroo, namely, Isaac Asenion Asimov (What ever kept him from being an All American Football player with that handle?) for the finis of his epistle in the Fall number.

"I Love Planet! I Love Planet! I Love Planet! I—We're both liars! We're both liars! We're both—" Good Heavens. How did that get on the record?

Frankly, and to the point, I think our Cowboy writes much better Science Fiction than he does Westerns. The example in this issue (Written to convey to me, purposely, just how tough he is) is just one collection of boners. Frinstantiate: We don't have rain barrels in Texas. What would we use one for? We never have rain. And it was dryer when the Big Bad Boy from Brooklyn was there than it is now.

What he fell into was probably one of the post holes we dig and lean up against a building till we need it.

Also we don't have "Gringoes." Everybody is a Lone Ranger.

What's more, this Tex Ako he refers to wasn't tough. Slick, but not tough. As for Monti Cello, I never met him but if he is anything like the rest of the family he was a party-waist.

I knew his brother, "Vermey."

And that famous "Pearl handled .22" was known, Mr. Asenion, as a "Twenty-second pistol."

Also, I would like to go on record, Mr. Editor, as agreeing heartily with your assertion that "Gifford is as good as Asimov" I could add a little to it but folks would think I was stuck on myself.

I'll meet him at the Rose bowl, Racquet Club or the Pool hall. Catch as catch can with no holds barred. With or without teeth. I'm the roughest, roarin' rowdie what ever rode a rattler, roped a rarin— rarin— (Where the Hell is my Thesaurus?)



The Cowboy goes on to remark that fifty-two people were killed for using the phrase, "As good as Asimov."

They weren't killed. They choked on the name.

One of my friends just returned from Brooklyn. Said he stepped into a phone booth, dialed "Operator," then accidentally belched into the phone and got Asimov.

Now that I'm good and het up I'll tell you what I'm really mad about.

Why did Asimov disqualify himself on the grounds that he was a professional and wasn't entitled to the letter votes?

Doesn't he think professionals like to win prizes?

Theatre managers win "Bank Nights." They're professionals.

Why didn't the cowboy wait till he'd won a prize and then get honorable?

Or was he afraid to wait?

Didn't he learn percentages at Columbia? Heavens! He should have gotten that at Brooklyn High.

Like fifty thousand others I make my living by my wife working while I write and draw. That makes me a professional.

So I'll have to disqualify myself, but first I'd like to give John Lapin's letter a vote (The rat) (From Mt. Pleasant, too).

Also you might inform Lapin that I still buy and intend to buy S.F. rags just to read the letters. (He should be tickled pink that he is assured of at least one reader. Editors never read them. They just glance over them and if their eyes don't hurt they print 'em.) I'm not too good to read the fiction—I'm too much interested in personalities, to bother with fiction.

What I'm trying to say is that a writer who has learned the craft well enough to peddle a few stories has submerged his individuality beneath his so-called "Style"—he has ceased to be a personality—he is a robot who simply puts certain situations in regular order to make it look pleasing and entertaining to most eyes. He then flavors it with a few similes, garnishes it with copied dialogue, ties on a pay-off and the fiction guplers lap it up.

Now the letter writer doesn't have the essentials for flavoring at hand (wonder what happened to my Thesaurus?) so he writes like he would talk. His personality sticks out like a preposition at the end of a sentence. Hell. You practically meet the guy. You for instance up there in Mt. Pleasant, friend Lapin, are a rather thin, nervous sort of an individual. You dabble in this and that. Right now you'd like to be a writer. You've studied Art appreciation and may draw a little. You're thinking about looking into Government work—mebbe the F.B.I. Mebbe Radio. You sound like you might be a Ham—either way. I'd say you're about 22. You're the boss in your house—or mebbe like yours truly, you just think you are.

If you'll send along a dollar, let me know what month you were born, and why, I'll work out a complete horoscope.

Anyway, thanks for listenin',

"The Man from the Fourth Dimension."

GUY GIFFORD.

## AND WE LOVE YOU TOO!

Dear Mr. Gifford:

We're always pleased when readers write in to

say that they like our modest efforts. But the unrestrained affection of yourself and Mr. Asimov is unnerving. If carried too far, it might even lead to downright chaos among our staff, for a magazine is bound to suffer badly when its heretofore hard-headed editors move about murmuring sweet nothings and thinking beautiful thoughts. But we don't want either of you to go away mad, or unrequited, so I'll just say that like the sparrows, we know, love and count every one of you!

I'm sorry to have to disagree with you about an accomplished author prostituting his individuality to his style. It has always seemed to me that the reverse should be true—namely, that the author's style—if he's any good—is necessarily moulded by his personality. If it isn't, then he has no style at all, and so cannot be distinguished from a hundred others. An author is good because he has a particular individuality (and therefore style) that makes him recognizable amongst the crowd. Like the various hors-d'oeuvres on a table, every writer has his own particular flavor—or should have. You should be able to label him or her as Binder, Brackett, Cummings or—yes, even Asimov. A good example is Bond, whose style I would call particularly distinctive. You may remember some issues back when we printed a Bond story under a pseudonym, and nearly everyone who wrote in recognized him. But it's still an open argument.

I'm afraid we can't see our way clear to disqualify either you or Asimov. Since Mr. A. so modestly withdrew, the idea has become contagious, and if it continues, all our correspondents will be on the voluntarily disqualified list—and then whom would we give the pics to? We'd have to start all over again and build up a new department for the "Count-Me-Outs." It is such business, Mr. Gifford, that leads to revolution!

The Ed.

## LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF PLANET

Judsonia, Arkansas.

DEAR EDITOR:

We Arkansans hold with the Declaration of Independence that all men are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But we also hold one other principle—we believe that we, as American citizens, are entitled to grouch at, to, or about any person or thing we choose, irrespective of time, place, or anything else. In pursuance of this prerogative—dictionary words; I looked 'em up special for this letter—I think that I shall grouch at you and your mag for a page or two. To be specific, I intend to grouch exactly sixteen cents' worth. I arrived at this figure by subtracting the value of the Fall issue, which I estimated at seven cents, from the price, twenty cents, and adding thereto the cost of the stamp to mail this letter.

It all happened this way: I was standing before the magazine rack in a local drugstore the other day, looking for a copy of my favorite national weekly, when my eye fell on the cockeyed cover of the Fall issue. "What the heck is that?" I pondered. At length I decided it was a free-for-all, and being Irish, and therefore partial to free-for-alls, I plunked down my two dimes so that I could find out what started the fight. Went home and started reading, and read the whole mag in one stretch. So far I've only re-read it twice, but I expect to start the third time tonight. After

thinking it all over, here are my decisions:

The Vizigraph is one of the most interesting parts of the mag, though some of the letters run to type. I have a grouch or two for that department, though. This guy Asimov—say, Ed, just what is the idea, anyhow? If he is advertising Asimov, tell him to try the classified ads. That's what they're for. And if he is trying to be an author, his junk belongs in the next edition of McGuffey's First Reader, not in Planet. Which ever it is, *Throw 'im out, puh-lease!* And I never did like infants—especially poetic infants—who sign "Jr." to their names. Tell Washington that for me, will you? Conover's idea about credit lines for artists is good, since many of the signatures are illegible. You can't blame some of them for being bashful about acknowledging their work, when you consider the quality of some of it, though. At any rate, if this letter should win a pic, send it to Conover, for he deserves it.

I thoroughly enjoyed most of Binder's *Vassals of the Master World*. To Binder—three orchids. Bond's *Shadrach* wasn't half bad, either. *The Raiders of Saturn's Rings* sounds like old stuff to me. It was far below the Binder and Bond stories.

I would rate *Dead Man's Planet* fourth, *The Star of Satan* fifth, and *South to Propontis* a low sixth.

*Spawn of the Venus Sea*, and *The Victory of Klon*—a bouquet of skunk cabbage to Walton and a dozen decadent onions to Peacock for these. Frankly, they smell. Why not leave out such rubbish and have room for a longer Vizigraph?

The illustration for *Spawn of the Venus Sea* was OK, as was the Lynch for *Klon*. The cover would have been fine, if it had matched the story. Don't these darn artists even read the stories before they make their drawings? Some of them don't look like it. The Bok for *The Star of Satan* was good, but the Hall for *Dead Man's Planet*—how did it rate space? The average fifth grader can do better.

I guess that I've run a little over my sixteen cents' worth, so here's a posey, all for you, Ed: On the whole, I liked your mag—so much so that I foresee future bankruptcy in the Wellington household, especially if PS should come out as a monthly instead of a quarterly. There, now I guess that evens the score. Hoping for a bigger and better Winter issue, I remain,

Yours sincerely,

JAMES WELLINGTON.

## BYLINES FOR ARTISTS

Dear Mr. Wellington:

Thanks for the posey. Because of it, you have four cents change coming. The suggestion of Mr. Conover and yourself is a good one, and as you can see, we've already embodied it. As Mr. Conover's letter in the last issue snared him first place, and thus a pic, I don't feel we can send him yours, also. But a posey to you too, anyway, for the charitable thought.

The Ed.

## WHAT—NO PIC!

Klamath Falls, Oreg.

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just finished reading PS from cover to cover and the only thing worth reading was the Vizigraph.

This is not a complaint letter 'cause I don't

care what you do with your old mag, just so you leave the Vizigraph in. In any case I'll probably read PS on account of I read every science fiction magazine printed.

I have only one suggestion to make and that is, why don't you print a time travel or fourth dimension story once in a while? I'm sure that no one would object to that.

The Ballad of Blaster Bill was plenty good. Grab that guy. The one who wrote it, I mean. Have him create another heroic stumble bum and write a series of stories or saga's about him.

Until your next issue I'll wait passionately—I meant patiently, or did I?

By the way, I am not trying to get an original or anything. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I had it.

Sincerely yours,

LOYD DEMAIN.

Ed. Note: You'll be glad to know Bond has a new poem, "The Ballad of Venus Nell," coming up in the next issue.

## AND NOW THE SFTSOGODATFOMT RSITPU

5809 Beechwood Ave.,  
Indianapolis, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR:

A very amazing thing has just occurred. Here's how it happened.

It seems that a day or so ago I had lots of spare time on my hands (Which is amazing enough itself), so I picked up my copy of PLANET and began to read. I read clear through from end to beginning (I started with the last story and read through to the first), and when I had finished I discovered that a horrible, mind-shattering thing had happened. As much as I hate to admit it, I am forced to confess that I *actually* enjoyed every story but one (Score one for Hildy!). You realize, I trust, what such a thing means to me? Maybe my sister is right. Perhaps I am going crazy.

The fact that I liked Binder's novel (?) least of all would seem to bear out such a horrible conclusion.

Top honors this ish, in my estimation, should go to Ackerman's *South to Propontis*. Nothing outstanding, just a darn nice story. Then, too, it wasn't full of the usual thuds and blunders you seem to cater to.

Second is *Shadrach*, a typical "Bond." Incidentally, is Bond really Wellman, or is the use of chrysanthemum-like Martians in *Shadrach* merely coincidental?

Third goes to *Dead Man's Planet*, with *The Star of Satan* runner up. Since I am somewhat lazy today, the others, sad to say, I shall overlook.

The artwork, unfortunately, wasn't much to my taste this time. Lynch, as usual, was worse. How guys can rave about such stuff and then turn thumbs down on Eron is beyond me. (This would be as good a place as to shout: "I Want Eron!" I would like to see him take the place of Lynch, not to mention a few covers. If you don't comply—)

Morcy poor, Hall poor, Bok good, Paul poor (Including the cover), Dun so magnificent that I shall forgive you everything! I'd like to lay claim to that Dun right now, unless I could possibly get Eron's pic for "The Cosmic Juggernaut," in which case some other ecstatic fan can have it. (Presumptuous, ain't I?)



Ta-ta, ta-ta, ta-ta, ta-ta, ta-ta, ta-ta, ta—t—blub! Comes now the Vizigraph! Before I forget it, you should give the letters to Hidley, Stern, and "The Hermit" (Thank you, Larry, for upholding me. You, brother Hidley, shall receive one dozen assorted time bombs C.O.D. If any should fail to go off, please send them back so that I can collect the refund.)

At this point I should like to announce the formation of the SFTSOGODATFOMTRISITPU (Society for the Suppression of Good Old Dazers and the Furtherance of Measures to Remove Such Individuals to Parts Unknown), D. B. Thompson and Larry Shaw are hereby appointed Official Agitators, and you, dear Ed., shall be the Dazer Catcher, Official Executor, and Official Office Boy. No charge for joining, just drop me a card and you will receive a certificate of membership.

Guys who should be boiled in oil are Maxwell, for not wanting Eron and Smalle, Conover, for kicking about *one* ad (I've seen letters by a Willis A. Conover in old mags. Same guy?), and Asimov, for disqualifying himself.

By the way, pard, Asimov wuz stringing you with that story. However, mainly it were so. He jest got a few things wrong, so we'll fergit it this time. I might tell you the real story some time.

Which is about all this time, except to yell once more for a monthly PLANET and say that I hope this is one of the letters you answer.

LEONARD MARLOW.

P. S.: Don't mind the marks you see scattered around so plentifully. I just haven't mastered the Columbus System yet. Oh yes, I'd like to announce the publication of *Infinite*, a 36-page mimeo'd mag selling for \$15, six for \$75. Suckers please remit to above address. Bi-monthly, by the way.

Ed. Note: Bond is not Wellman. A case of pure coincidence.

## IT'S A SYSTEM

1301 State St.,  
Schenectady, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Thanx a lot for printing my letter. That's probably the most unusual way you ever saw a letter start in. But I've gotta be different somehow, so I'll be polite. Anyway, I was pleasantly surprised . . . "amazed" would be a better word . . . to see it in print. I'm still afraid that it won't be there the next time I open the mag. I wonder if any other fans felt like that the first time they had a letter printed.

Enuff of this. The cover of the Fall issue was positively the best so far. The hero and heroine are back, I see. But good. Slightly inaccurate, tho. You know me.

Now, listen! What's the idea of springing such a bunch of darn *good* stories on me? How do you expect a poor fella who was never any good at rating anything, anyway, to rate such a raft of nifties as that? Oh, well. Revenge is sweet! You asked for it. I'm going to spring my new rating system on you. Don't beg for mercy; it won't do any good.

Here goes: This is really a variation of the "Harry Warner 1-to-10 system." Instead of numbers, tho, I use the planets. That is, instead of No. 1, I use Pluto; instead of No. 2, I use Neptune, etc. It takes a really terrible story to get out this far. The earth, Tellus, is No. 7, which I consider as pretty good. For No. 1, I

use the sun, Sol. It takes a really great story to get that far. I guess that's enuff explanation. Now for the stories in the Fall issue. Heh, her! Pity the poor Editor.

*Vassals of the Master World* made it! Yep, all the way to "Sol." Binder is never poor, and this one was great, no less. It approached the much-spoken-of "magnificent scope and power" of the one and only Dr. Smith.

*The Victory of Klon* came down to "Tellus." Just a neat little short, that's all.

*The Star of Satan* made a landing on "Tellus," too. The ending on this one pulled it up. I knew Hasse could do it. I bet he'll do better, too.

*Dead Man's Planet* made "Venus." R.R. is always entertaining.

*The Raiders of Saturn's Rings* also went to "Venus." Two ringers in a row for Ray Gallun.

*South to Propontis* was another for "Tellus." Definitely fan type of fiction, and definitely good.

*Spawn of the Venus Sea*, with plenty of suspense and good writing, also made "Venus."

And last, but not least, *Shadrach* went all the way to "Mercury." Tho I don't agree with those who say that Bond will be a great writer some day, he is *always* very good and very entertaining. I can't think of an author I'd miss more if he wasn't around.

I'll make my comment on the art as short as possible. Bok best, Paul practically perfect, tho not as good as last time. Hall and Dun both very welcome with refreshing styles. Morey poor, and Lynch at just about his worst yet.

Before I pick the best letters, I have a suggestion. Why not two Vizigraphs? The regular one, and one for letters from Asimov. He isn't in a class with the rest of us. He knows it, too. On second thought, put Hidley in the special one, too. He has enuff originals.

First place goes to W. A. Conover. I follow the Vizigraph regularly, but I'm confused on one point myself. Most letter writers ask for originals from the issue they write about. I thought you got 'em from the ish your letter is in. Is everybody else wrong, or am I?

For obvious reasons, I'll put my letter second.

Third place is harder. Give it to Al Maxwell. I *knew* there was something wrong about *Dragon Queen*, but couldn't figure what it was. That's why I started that crack about the jungles of Venus. Then I looked at the title and stopped. By the way, the titles of your stories are just plain terrible. Some of them don't seem to have anything to do with the story, even. Can't you do something about this?

Just a word of praise here for "Raym's" poem. It was swell, especially since I'm a Solaroid.

I'm still trying to get in touch with fans, or just plain readers, around Schenectady. Being a hermit is all right most of the time, but it's tuff when you have to start writing a lot of relatives you don't even remember and asking them to vote for your letter in PLANET STORIES.

G'bye, now. Yours in Stf,

LARRY SHAW.  
(The Hermit)

P.S.: If enuff of my relatives do write in, and I win anything, I'd like the Bok, the Paul, or the Hall. Anything will do, tho.

## TELLUS TO YOU, MR. SHAW

Dear Mr. Shaw:

Your "Harry Warner 1-to-10" variation did baffle us, and we were beginning to feel be-



witched and inferior—until a closer examination showed us that it even baffled you. Too much system is apt to be a bad thing, Mr. Shaw. I admit freely that we're still spinning, trying to figure it out—but on the basis of Pluto being 1, and Sol also being 1; and the fact that it takes a bad yarn to get as far as Neptune, and a really swell one to get as far as the sun . . . well, Mr. Shaw, compared to our own mild gyration, you must be a regular dervish.

As for the originals, most of the letter-writers ask for a specific one, which is, of course, in the previous issue to the one in which their winning letters appear. If we were to send them pics from the same issue that runs their letters, what would we have left to fill the demands of those who want pictures from that issue when their letters come out in the following issue, the illustrations of which they can't at that time know about, since their current letter is printed the same time as the issue containing the new pics?

There's one for you, to work over, Mr. Shaw. And let's hear from you again.

The Ed.

## HELP!

121 Bellaire Ave.,  
Springfield, Ohio.

DEAR EDITOR:

I am sending you this vizigram from space sector R-29. I am being held here by a super ray manned by a mad Martian. Mars is being destroyed by huge six-footed fire-breathing monsters. My companion has died, killed by a zanziaz ray gun and we are being captured by the nine-foot Martians.

As I vize out this vizigram a beautiful woman is being tortured by a hunch-back, bow-legged, buck-toothed, hook-nosed, old Martian half-wit.

They say they will kill us if you, dear editor, do not send every one of them the next issue of PLANET STORIES within a month. Please make this a monthly magazine so I and the beautiful maiden will not be kilt to death.

Yours hopefully,

CAPT. BO BLAIR,  
Space Cruiser No. 237.

P. S.: *Vassals of the Master World* was swell.

## LET'S TAKE THE COVER—

2302 Ave. O,  
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Please don't ask "what's all the noise." The answer is really simple . . . Lesser is vizigrapting a message to ye Ed. Let's see if you can take it; yeah, flattering praise and sickening criticism . . . the newest issue of PLANET merits some of both.

Now take the cover for instance (you can take it; I don't want it). The drawing was undeniably good, and the coloring made the mag stand out, but Paul, who is so masterful at the machine and scientific cover—has to take the hero, heroine and villain angle . . . stick in an orange-eyed Zwinlik (which was asked for by a fan some time ago) as the villain, and spoil his rep. Why, may I ask, did he do it? Oh, well, we can't have everything. I guess I really should be satisfied. If Drake had handled the situation it would have turned out a horrible mess.

Before I go on to the stories, I'd like to suggest something. Put Paul on the cover with a scientific pic, or put Bok on with action, or Finlay (if you must) with girls. If Morey takes his

time, he, too, can follow in Paul's steps; the scientific cover for this ink-slinger. As for Lynch . . . well I guess that'd be asking for something against the majorities' will, so forget him.

The stories were quite good as a whole, and away out in front is Binder's powerful, full-length saga of the slave-galaxy. Yes, *Vassals of the Master World* had everything published in PLANET to date beat. And this definitely proves that the long novel is, after all, the best. And it also proves that Eando Binder is the best s-f author. At first it seemed to me that Ed. Hamilton or one other might nose him out. But not with a story like this one. Binder's on top to stay, I think. Let's have more of him, and something from Hamilton (if that's possible) and definitely, a full-length novel as often as possible. Incidentally, in my opinion, (and I think it will be justified) it was this novel that stopped the Fall PLANET from falling way below the level of the Summer and preceding issues.

In second place is the novelet by Bond. *Shadrach* (and this sounds strange when one speaks about Bond) had a swell, scientific and adventure plot . . . but was handled terribly. It could have developed into a close rival for my first choice, even though it could never, no matter how handled, beat Binder's novel to the tip top. For one thing, the adventures at the Cave of Cold Fire should have been stretched out longer . . . Nelson S. Bond skipped past it as though it was a minor, unimportant part of the story. Though, I guess he knew what he was doing. But then, just think of the magnificent way he handled *The Ultimate Salient*, exactly one year ago.

Henry Hasse cops third honors with that really grand short adventure yarn, *Star of Satan*. Hasse should be kept on adventures like the high ranking Proktoles and this . . . when he writes them, they are almost always good. I think if he took his time, H.H. could turn out for you an excellent full-lengther. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think I know my man.

*Spawn of the Venus Sea* by Walton deserves fourth ranking. It was a good Fantasy-Science-Fiction-all-in-one-yarn. In a tale like this, treacherous seas (or space-lanes) with equally dangerous crews plotting mutiny, and a horrible, seemingly deathless monster to boot, Harry Walton is always superb. He's a good addition to your author staff. Manley Wade Wellman wouldn't be a bad guy to get hold of either (hopeful hint).

In fifth place is Winterbotham's *Dead Man's Planet*. That it was good is beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt . . . but R. R. Winterbotham, in the light of such tales as *Genesis* or *The Monster that Threatened the Universe* can be better. How about having him do a novelet?

Wilber S. Peacock's short-short, *The Victory of Klon*, is a good, cleverly written piece of its size and deserves sixth place . . . and it was about the last good story in the issue. Peacock is another good addition to your staff . . . and that's two in one issue. But the third new author to PLANET, uh-oh!

For seventh place I guess there is a tie. I guess I couldn't come to an agreement as to which was worse . . . so I gave it up. Gallun's *Raiders of Saturn's Rings* and Ackermann's *South to Pro-pontis* (the third new addition) were utterly and beyond a doubt, perturbing. The former was a dragged-out affair of sloppy mush, with not the slightest spark of the magnificent Gallun of last issue. Ackermann's s-f story (?) was just badly

written adventure, and a poor excuse for a good story, at that.

The illustrations in this issue were decidedly under the grade of the Summer number. Paul, and Lynch (*Shadrach*) were about the two best, with Morey's for Walton's yarn trailing behind them.

There are definitely two distinct types of Bok; he is a dual artist . . . please let him keep his Summer ish style, his drawing in this issue was not so hot. Lynch is now developing a neat sketchy style that is very, very good. Keep it up, Don, old boy, you'll get on top yet!

Well, well . . . I notice that Cummings is at last off the register. (Faint hope.) Does ye Ed at last realize that names aren't everything? I hope so. It seems to me that most of the "Big Namers" like Binder, Bond, Rocklynne, etc., are good. But some just can't click all the time. For instance, Cummings has had only one good yarn in *PLANET* out of all of them. That surprising story which was practically a reprint of *Girl in the Golden Atom* appeared in the second issue.

As for the originals, give first to W. A. Conover who obviously knows what he's talking about; second to Hidley, my favorite letter-writer. (No, not just because he voted my letter in the Summer ish first.) And lastly let Shaw get an il.

My choice for the original (how foolish to even mention it, someone says), well, maybe . . . is Paul and then Lynch for the last story.

Hoping that this gets in print, I leave you with the torturous fact that I am soon to plague you with a story; a story devised in my cranium. I hope you live through it.

Improvingly yours,  
MILTON LESSER.

Ed's Note: Hope you like Bok's cover job on this issue. At least you can't find the increasingly-discussed Zwiłnik in it.

## A WORTHY CAUSE

2050 Gilbert St.,  
Beaumont, Tex.

DEAR EDITOR:

Your magazine has always appealed to me as being one of the leading Science Fiction publications. The main thing about *PLANET STORIES* is its economy—as you get more stories of a better quality for a low price. Who cares about loud grotesque or fancy illustrations in a mag, as long as you get first quality stories by the best authors in that field? I for one like PS as it is, and would not care to see it change even one little bit.

It might be of interest to all S-F fans to know that there is such an organization as the British Science Fiction War Relief Society—which supplies Science Fiction magazines to British fans. This organization is depending on all interested persons—who desire to help the cause of S-F—to donate old S-F mags. Also needed are unused U.S.A. stamps to mail them with. I am the director of this organization. . . . Further particulars furnished gladly to all who write me. . . .

Sincerely yours,  
JOHN M. CUNNINGHAM,  
Director, BSFWRS.

The BSFWRS has the approval of ALL major S-F fans.

## CHEERS FOR PAUL

Winnsboro, La.

DEAR EDITOR:

Here's for the Fall '41 ish of Planet. First

of course the cover. This I believe is your first Paul cover. Magnificent, too good for words, and this seems to be drawing away from your so gash covers, but it is still a little to loud for my taste. If you keep up having artists like Finlay, Paul and as you hint Bok, you will be in a class by yourself.

But still the B. e. M.'s and a B. H. scantily clad as usual, but this has happened so often it is beginning to not bother me so much.

Would someone please shoot Lynch? Anything, anything to get him out of Planet. Awful, goshawful. His was the only really bad pic in the whole mag. All of his pix since the first one have been poor, poorer, and poorest. In other words can Lynch. Paul's was best interior as usual. Dun and Hall tied for second. Moreys for *Spawn of the Venus Sea* was third, and his for *Raiders of Saturn's Rings* was fourth. Lynch's for *Shadrach* was of course last.

Dun and Hall, to me, are new to PS, both are good. More.

I see The Vizigraph has an extra page this issue. Add about two more and you will have it about long enough. First Prize to Al Maxwell, second to Charles Hidley and third to W. A. Conover. I would have given 3rd to Asmirov but as he said he is a pro and should not be rated. The Feature Flash is O.K. but not enough of it.

And to the harassed old Editor many thanks for a swell mag that has been to my own private knowledge improving since the 2nd ish.

The Vizigraph is the best letter dept. of any and I would and have bought the mag only for the Vizigraph.

As I have read the stories guess I will leave off now.

Thanks for listening,  
THOMAS BRACKETT.

P.S.: "Blaster Bill's" last ish was in a class all by itself.

## A BAS PAUL!

140-92 Burden Crescent,  
Jamaica, New York.

DEAR EDITOR:

So we s-f fans have finally gotten a Paul cover after these many, many eons of raving. Yeah! (note the tone, a nice blend of sun-ripped sarcasm, disgust and pessimism, in which this word is uttered). So we fans would also like to rip it off and throw it into a wastebasket! Certainly it is far from the best work that FP has done in his 15-odd years as an s-f artist—and that's putting it conservatively, but it still might have been passable had it not been for the colors. Gad! What a nightmarish and lurid conglomeration of hues—bright yellow on a background of deep red, with a foreground of varied tones of blue and green. Not only that, but the you-know-what cover theme is presented for the eighth consecutive time—the only variation being that the villains are particularly sinister-looking. Added to all this is the spectacle of planets shooting all over the place with numerous bits of lettering to fill up the bare spots, and you have a swell mess. I hate to pan one of my favorite artists (though it's only partially his fault), but there it is. Still, this painting isn't as bad as some of the early ones.

Seriously, why is it that you have such relatively poor success with the cover work? (a question you've probably been asking yourself).

Can it be that PS exudes such an evil atmosphere that the delicate dispositions of the artists cannot withstand it? At any rate, only one artist—Finlay—had any measure of success on the cover.

Aside from this one point (now that the icy criticism is finished, you can come out and bask in some praise), the Fall '41 issue is by far the best of the eight. The main factor in this improvement is, of course, the stories, none of which were bad, all being either fair, good or excellent.

The one excellent story is Binder's *Vassals of the Master World*. Ah, at last a story on the galaxy-spanning dimensions of E. E. Smith's great epics—though naturally not half as good. But still it is one of the best yarns Planet has printed, ranking with *The Ultimate Salient*. Not often does Eando grind out such good tales. In second place is *Shadrach* and Bond once again comes up with a good story. The No. 3 spot is taken by *Raiders of Saturn's Ring*—at least one of Earth's bane, hayfever, has been put to one beneficial use—and Walton's *Spawn of the Venus Sea* rates fourth spot. I could continue to rate the stories up to eighth place but four is enough to ferret out the better ones.

Best interior pix are the two by Paul and Bok. Now let's get down to brass tacks . . . er, I mean the Vizigraph . . . and pick the best letters. This is becoming correspondingly more difficult with each passing issue, but after a great deal of blood, sweat and tears I have evolved this choice—Conover, Stern, Asimov. Incidentally, I wish Asimov would quit harping on this "Asenion" business. After all, so much is so much, enough is enough, and too much is too much (boy, what gems of wisdom!).

It looks as if my letters are getting to be a permanent feature in Le Vizi. People are going to start saying: "Pore ol' Stoy keeps apluggin' and apluggin' away in PS, and all the while the editor only puts in his letter to show how good the others are by comparison." Ah well, such are the hardships we martyrs must bear (Sigh).

Sincerely,  
BILL STOV.

## KEEP OSCAR BUSY

117 Hamilton Street,  
Live Oak, Florida.

### DEAR EDITOR:

Once again, a dim light filters through illimitable space, and impinges on my dull consciousness. Wearily I quiver back to life and claw my way upward through loose-packed earth and slimy, unmentionable Horrors until I break surface and leave the fearful caverns below. Blinking in the light, I reason: "What brought me up?" I think hard. "Ah! Planet! I wonder if . . ." and there, sure enough, is my poem and letter. Soon the hapless newsstand guy is cold and gasping in the gutter, and back I run with the mag tucked securely under a scaly arm. Burrowing deep into my home, I pant with eagerness, and many a horror is squashed beneath my charge. And then, in the quiet safety of my sanctuary, I turn to the *Vizigraph*. As time passes I drool and soon this copy is a mess, So I send Oscar the Ghoul out to get me another.

There are several authors that I have come to

think of as a standard of excellence. Eando Binder is one of them. When I settle down to a tale by him, I just naturally know it's good. *Vassals of the Master World* is in this class. Strangely enough, I did not like either novelette. Ditto for *Spawn of the Venus Sea*. The title reminded me of some of my many Stif nicknames. Namely, *Raym of the Star Flecked Cosmos* (which is the most descriptive), *the Spawn of the Cosmos Eternal*, and *the Slave of the Mad Professor*.

Just lately I saw "The Devil Commands" with Boris Karloff and anyone (any fan) who misses it should be made to drink buttermilk, over in Ed's Saloon in Crooked Gulch, until the poisonous fumes fill their heads and lay them out on the table, bleary wrecks of good men.

And that reminds me, Isaac Asimov writes the best darn letters in the mag, professional or not.

I am rather sorry my letter was printed. Not for myself, but for the Editor. Now I will plague him with letters until he has a nervous breakdown, and then Planet will go on the rocks. All kidding aside, tho, Ed, you've done a fine job with the mag, and even the rest of us cynical souls will have to admit it. Keep it up.

RAYMOND WASHINGTON, JR.

Ed's NOTE: Sorry we couldn't print the poem you sent along with this letter, but *Sun Spots* owns the rights, and we can't just lift it. It's a good one, tho'.

## TEN BILLION HAPLESS SOULS

700 East North Street,  
Opelousas, Louisiana.

### DEAR EDITOR:

Another conquest! A battle won! At last, PAUL ON THE COVER! Nice goin'. It was swell—super-swell; and to think he has done better!

The Fall ish was not as good as the summer number, but Binder's *Vassals of the Master World*, was the best yarn to appear in PS yet, topping even Bond's *Dictator of Time* and *The Ultimate Salient*, as well as Repp's *The Martian Terror* and Fearn's, *The Cosmic Juggernaut*. I've already placed it on my list of the best twenty stories I have ever read. This is MY type of story. Blue Tharkians with four arms; ten billion men killed in one battle; a planet so huge that a thousand Jupiters would be a mere hail-storm. Good Lord! That's vast enough. Anyone who does not place this first in the ish is hereby declared mentally unfit to roam loose on the streets without a muzzle.

Your best author, Mr. Bond, turned out an unusual yarn with appeal. His characters live and each is unique, different. *Shadrach* was very good. I really liked it.

Laurels for third place go to ever-pleasing Gallun. His yarn lacked the novelty of Bond's tale, though it was unusual enough.

4th: *South to Propontis*: Enjoyable. 5th: *Star of Satan*: good, but nothing new. 6th: *Dead Man's Planet*: Absorbing—rather different. 7th: *Spawn of the Venus Sea*: Walton has done better, and he had done a lot worse. This is the old, "hero destroys indestructible menace" stuff. It started off bad, but the way it picked up and ended as well as its fine characterization made it thoroughly readable. 8th: *Victory of Klon*: Too short, no "body," too many thats.

Mr. Reiss, I find that you have far, far too

many interplanetary stories. Every one, with the possible exception of Ackermann's and Walton's, was blasting rocket ships from start to finish. In the last issue EVERY ONE was interplanetary stuff! This is overdoing it. How about a dimensional yarn. (This is my meat.) Or a time story like Bond's of some time back?

The pics, in order: Paul (wonderful!), Bok (V. G.), Morey's for Walton's (Great improvement!), Dun's (Good, but too "unscientific-fictional"). Send them in that order if this letter earns one.

Glance over the letters Mr. Reiss, and you'll see that your reader's column is an almost unanimous choice as the number one blatt section. Now, it is by far the largest and the best. No other can even compare with it. The letter I liked best in the Fall ish was my own. (I'm not an egotist.) So, therefore, I shed my cloak of false modesty and. . . No, I CANNOT do it! First place, if he doesn't mean that about disqualifying himself, must go to Asenimov—I'm compromising. Second to Raymond Washington for that poem. Even if I'm the only one who votes for the guy, ye ed is a piker if he doesn't ship a pic to Ray. That was really good. Third to the "new" Hidley. The astute old fella who was sagely guiding you through the right channels has disappeared. In this last letter he was a gay li'l guy. Stern Mr. Stern, who doesn't agree with me on the cover wins honorable mention. Give him a pic to cut into paper dolls; he's nuts!

Out of the long list of things I said I wanted and did not want, you have obliged in each case except: A lot of: M. W. Wellman, the real Cummings' "stuff." More of: Bond's poems, Miss Brackett. Less of: Interplanetary yarns.

Fulfill these and I'm yours for life. As it is, you're the best ed in the field—now, Mr. Reiss, don't blush so!—and with a few more improvements your mag will be at the top too.

Continue to lend an appreciative ear to the reader's pleas and do as the majority suggests.

Thanks for another good issue,

Very sincerely yours,

ALFRED E. MAXWELL.

Ed's Note: And thanks for the bouquets. Paul's cover has certainly found plenty of Pros and Cons. So far, it seems to be a tie.

## FROM OUR ROVING CORRESPONDENT

N'Voshali, Ganymede.

DEAR EDITOR:

It must have been about the hour of 14 that A' chis Ru, who keeps the Moon of Mars bookshop on the Street of the Nine Thousand Asteroids called me to say that the freighter Terra had brought in a new consignment of books and papers. I finished drinking the glass of Rodak I held, snuffed out the syntho-cigarette by my side and grabbed an areo-cab.

He was fuming, when I got there. Under the vizilights that cast an almost pure solar glow, he changed colors so rapidly I was afraid he would puff up and burst. I've seen Martians do that. . . .

"Great bug-eyed monsters!" he roared, as I came in. "Of all the fantastic stuff these space-lawyers can write, this takes the gness. Look at this!"

He spread out several mags. We glanced in

horror at Qeasay Stories, Fantastic Muck and Awful Tales.

Now, I feel that I may speak with some authority, for my great-grandfather was in the astrogational crew of the first Alpha Centauri expedition, and our family has lived on Ganymede for more than fifty years. It has been my fortune to spend more time in outer space than on Terra.

A'chs Ru was a pioneer and as a young man, served aboard several ships exploring and mapping outer space. An accident scared the adventure out of him, and instead of drinking Rodak to keep up his nerve, he just quit and opened up the Moon of Mars book and sweet shop, and has lived vicariously by reading the effusions of the writers of Terra in the many fantastic mags we get here. However, I do fear he is going to burst altogether, some day. Be it on your heads.

He has always had a weakness for Edgar Rice Burroughs. "He was the first Earthling to realize that outer space is dark," A'chs Ru declares. "I remember him saying so in *The Moon Maid*, before that blasted Picard ever examined the stratosphere of the earth and proved it. Why, E. R. B. has more sense than all the rest put together, even if he does make some pretty peculiar mistakes. That's neither here nor there, however, for if I remember our history as well as I should, we were going to send an expedition to Terra in 1802, Earth time, but we concluded not to because the planet was undoubtedly more than 70% water and we were afraid it would be inhabited by some peculiar form of sea life that might be ferocious. . . ." He paused to scratch his shoulder scales with a finely carved Martian back-scratcher. "I guess we weren't so far from wrong, at that! Great bug-eyed monsters!"

He waved a paw at the mags. "Same old stuff," he grumbled. "I'll be a roasted jynth if I know what the Solar system is coming to! How do these writing fellars get that way? They take the universe apart and put it back together every month. They must be as bloodthirsty as Arz! War! Pestilence! Why doesn't one of them write the truth for a change? Why do they always, that is, nearly always picture us Martians as blood-letting super brains? Why are the Venusians always green? Why doesn't someone realize that Venus is a staid, proper world and that it isn't so hot it has to wrap up in a cloud blanket to keep from scorching. Oh, yes, I know, first the astronomers of Terra said clouds, now they say clouds of dust, next week it will be vanilla ice cream! Great bug-eyed monsters, the sun doesn't give off heat, it gives off emanations, and from our observatories on Mars, let me tell you, Terra looks pretty much the same because of the Heavyside layer!"

"If I could write English, I'd scar their seeing organs for them!" A grin wrinkled his heavy red face, and he stopped turning all colors. It made him look even more ferocious, until he waved a feeler weakly. "I read every mag, anyhow," he confessed in a low tone. "Here," he thrust a copy of Planet at me. "Get out of here before I explode like an uncontrolled atom!"

So you see how it is out here on Ganymede . . .

Y'rz truly,

FINN.

P.S.—On Mars, roasted pynth is a great delicacy, that is, if you can get all the pynth-feathers out.

Ed. Note: We can forgive all but the postscript. That hurts!

## ATTENTION, S-F FANS

4TH WORLD SCIENCE FICTION  
CONVENTION!

Attention, Planeters! Plans for the 1942 Science Fiction Convention are already well under way. The location, of course, is Los Angeles. No sooner had the Daughertys, the Heinleins, Forrie, Morajo and others returned from Denver, than a special meeting was held and things started rolling. What! Did I hear someone say that '42 is a long way away, and these preparations seem a little premature? Well, that's only because you little know the way we do things here on the Coast. This thing is going to be BIG! With all due respect to New York, Chicago, and Denver, this Convention is going to be all of those in one, with so many extras thrown in that it'll make you dizzy thinking about it.

Already, before any announcement has appeared professionally, fifty fans on the inside have signed up as supporters of the Convention, and others are coming in every day. All readers who want to participate in the Convention should send \$1 at once to the Convention Secretary, Paul Freehafer, 349 S. Rampart Street, Los Angeles. This entitles you to a beautiful membership card, special stickers, etc. AND: *each member is going to be informed, personally, from time to time and in a most unique manner, of the further progress of the Convention plans!* So whether you're planning now to attend or not, send in your \$1; for you will plan to attend when this thing gets into full swing and more details are forthcoming.

Watch PLANET STORIES for these details! Meanwhile, a sample copy of the *Pacificnews*, setting forth further facts, is free to all from Convention Director Walter J. Daugherty, 6224 Leland Way, Hollywood, Calif.

ED. NOTE: We received the foregoing announcement from HENRY HASSE who has been appointed to keep science-fictiondom informed on the progress of plans for the '42 convention. So come on, S-F fans; dig down in your jeans and start the dollars rolling in to Paul Freehafer.

## "GENIUS" IS REALLY HOT

2306 So. Figueroa  
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Editor:

Some of your readers like your illustrations and cover design, and some don't. Me? I'm staying out of the argument. I just want to let you know that one of your severest art critics is a sort of artist himself. Who do I mean? Why none other than Guy Gifford, who aired his opinion in the Summer issue. G. "Genius" Gifford is a cartoonist, and who knows, perhaps he can illustrate too. He suggested that the fan letters be illustrated, and that a magazine should be created around the letters of one Asimov. Your answer was that Gifford's letters would make a foundation for a magazine too. Wonderful! You can start a magazine of his letters, illustrated by their author. What could be sweeter? Or, if you would rather stick to the present magazine, why not have Mr. Gifford submit cover illustration? How about it, "Genius?"

Sincerely,

BRUCE ROBERTS.

Ed. Note: How about it, "Genius?"

## MORE "PLANETS" WANTED

Springboro, Pa.

Dear Editor:

And so I have a Bok. Many thanks to you, kind sir, for printing my letter in the issue of Summer PLANET and my thanks too to those readers so misguided as to consider that missive worthy of mention. At this late date I write to thank you all. Also to crow over a certain superior male who says stff fans never read letters written by women.

I note that Asimov, the old woman-hater, is softening up a bit. Thawing out it would seem. In fact before long I expect to see him writing true confessions! Remember Asimov, remember, when you railed month upon month against dragging gals in by their hair? Can it be that the old bronc-broken cowpoke is losing his mind, or did some of that lead poisoning serve to snap his memory. . . . My husband is only a six foot runt, Asimov. . . .

PLANET is certainly coming to the top of the heap. Out of the dwindling number of fantasy magazines I now rate it third and its stock continues to rise. And to think I almost passed the first issue by as being too flashy! The covers could tame down a wee bit more of course and the conventionalized ringed worlds be excised. Your interior art is steadily improving and some of the best stories to appear in the last year have passed through Fiction House's editorial offices. Now all you need is a new dime magazine: SATELLITE, that would come out every month. . . . Sorry I mentioned it—just was remembering an article that Robert Bloch wrote a while back though about the thirty million prospective fantasy readers and the fact that only a slight fraction of them ever buy a fantasy pulp. No kidding I think that science fiction and fantasy are tops. The stories can be adventure, mystery, weird, detective, business, exploration—in fact anything, even to love! In fact, when space travel comes in I expect to see many a true confession devotee in I expect to see many a true confession devotee Pilot. . . . The news these days should make more of us get away from it all—on some other planet or some other age.

I'm not going to comment on any of the stories this time—they were all interesting. Also, much as I hate to admit it, I have mislaid the Fall Issue and can't for the life of me remember all the various titles. I did see though that another newcomer, Ackermann, made the grade this time. I hope this policy of introducing new blood every issue is a success and continues. And hang onto that Nelson Bond! Also I was glad to find an issue without a Cumming's yarn in it, he's getting in some of the readers' hair and a vacation will do him good. I can't even remember all the letters although I did think that Katherine Baum should get second place. . . . Next issue I'll sit right down after I finish reading and send along a letter.

Say, wouldn't a blue or red cover, with PLANET, PLANET, large and small printed PLANETS scattered over it all, be a success—or at least different?

Sincerely,

MRS. MARGARET WELLS.

Ed. Note: Mrs. Wells seems to have scared Asimov right out of the Vizigraph. But we sincerely hope he'll be back next issue.



## THANKS A MILLION!

California, Pa.  
225 Second St.

Dear Sir:

I wish to take this opportunity to thank you for the wonderful original drawing which I received in this morning's mail. I was, for some time, under the impression that you had forgotten me. After receiving your letter to the effect that you were sending me this masterpiece, I awaited the next mail delivery patiently; that is, if one can be patient while walking from room to room, drinking numerous cups of coffee, smoking cigarettes by the chain method and other sundry actions becoming only to that group of unfortunates known as "half-wits." Really though, after the wrapper had been hastily removed in no neat fashion and that wonderful piece of art held at arm's length, I realized that it was worth the time and nervous expectation endured. I can only say, "THANKS A MILLION."

This fellow, Eron, is one of the best. It was one of his drawings that I received, you know. Now, I am trying for one of Virgil Finlay's. He's tops. Why not let him do some interiors for a change? I also want one of Bok's. Don Lynch is another of my admirers. And of course, Paul; I surely would like one of his in my collection.

And now, may I ask if it is at all possible to buy some of these originals that you may, at the time, have on hand? You surely don't give them all away. If I am correct in my calculations, you should have approximately six per issue that might be stored on some shelf. That is a very poor place for drawings such as grace the covers and interiors of PLANET. If I am wrong and you have none to sell, please let me know if there are any readers that might wish to let some of theirs go. In either respect, please let me know, via THE VIZIGRAPH, what I might expect along this line.

No Greek fruit stands for ratings in this letter. D. B. Thompson will be pleased, at least. I will say, though, that the current issue of PLANET is one of the best. The only thing that I can think of at the moment to brick-bat is the fact that my last letter did not appear. Oh, you say that I must give the other fellow a chance, eh? O. K., I guess you're right, at that. Anyhow, I hope that this one will see THE VIZIGRAPH.

What has been done with the suggestions about the solid background on the cover? I'm still for it. (I'll bet this has plenty of mud thrown at it.)

Can't we have a monthly publication? I know there will be acclamations of assent to this.

Since my last letter didn't see print, I will repeat the remark therein to the fact that D. B. Thompson is perfectly welcome to write to me and exchange views. I write to a number of FANTASY and SCIENCE FICTION fans and would be very much pleased to correspond with him as well.

Another thing; I would like to see some of Heilman's work. Especially his impressions of some of the John Carter characters. I'll bet he could draw a Woola that is really something.

Well, I hope this rates printing, at least. I mean, really, I intend to keep on trying 'till I get that Finlay, Bok, Lynch and all the rest. You know, the waiting encompassed between the time that the letter is written and the publication date is almost as sweet expectation as that between the date of publication and the time

of realizing that one has actually won a drawing.

And now if I may list a few suggestions: First and, in my estimation, most important: Have Finlay do some interiors.

Second: Have Bok do more illustrations than he has been doing.

Third: Get some new names under the titles of the yarns printed. Outside of Cummings I'm becoming bored with the same authors each and every issue. Why not ask for new talent? I might even take a crack at writing something myself. Those manuscripts in my desk are gathering dust.

Fourth: Three months is far too long to wait for a favorite magazine. Monthly. Monthly.

Fifth: Now this may be a suggestion which it is impossible to consider; can we have stories by some of the Old Timers? There are yarns that were written years ago that can never be duplicated as far as quality is concerned. I'm speaking of Merritt, Hall, Flint, G. U. Geisy, Burroughs (his early Martian stories), and any number of the top raters.

Well, I'm running out of paper and 'though not being Scotch, I am rather conservative, so will sign off with the hope that all these remarks will be taken at their face values but not too seriously. So long 'till next time.

VAUGHAN RAULPH HEINER.

## THOSE MUCH-DISCUSSED DRAWINGS

Dear Mr. Heiner:

Many thanks for your letter. I'm sorry we couldn't print your last one, but we received so many that it was impossible to accommodate them all—even with the enlarged Vizigraph.

Anent your suggestion of having new names, this current issue should fill the bill for you with five newcomers—Connell, Norman, Lewis, Long and Wells. Mr. Finlay, unfortunately, is doing very little illustrating these days, and its a rare treat when we can get him to work for us.

So many other PLANET readers have written in requesting illustrations from back issues that it might be a good time to answer both yourself and them on this point. Unfortunately, none of them are for sale. A certain number are sent to the three winners of the letter contest each issue. As these winners have their choice of pics, and as we can't know what their choice may be until we hear from them, it would be bad policy to sell an illustration, and then have to tell them we're sorry we can't give them the one they want. Aside from those which are disposed of in this manner, the remaining pics are carefully stored (not on a dusty shelf) and are used from time to time for reference, or for comparisons which might possibly benefit the magazine. As to the possibility of buying drawings from the winners of letters, it would be better, I think, to contact them directly—unless, of course, one of them desires to sell and wants to have that fact noted in the Vizigraph.

As to the possibility of reprinting stories by some of the Old Timers, we have hewed very close to our policy of running only new material in PLANET. It is a possibility, however, and one that we shall consider. It all hinges, of course, on the eventuality of the rights for these stories being for sale. More about this later.

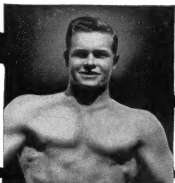
THE ED.



# HE Mailed This Coupon

## J. G. O'BRIEN Atlas Champion Cup Winner

This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.



## ...and Here's the Handsome Prize-Winning Body I Gave Him!

J. G. O'BRIEN saw my coupon. He clipped and mailed it. He got my free book and followed my instructions. He became a New Man—and also won one of my Atlas-Champion, Sterling Silver Cups for his physical improvement. NOW read what he says:

"Look at me NOW! Dynamic Tension WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion!'"—J. G. O'Brien.

### "I'll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN"—Charles Atlas

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE; I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

### Only 15 Minutes a Day

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. You learn to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension." You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-quick into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE. My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "Dynamic Tension"—almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

### FREE BOOK "EVERLASTING HEALTH AND STRENGTH"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE, CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 150-J, 115 East 23rd Street, New York City.



An untouched photo of Charles Atlas, winner of the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

## CHARLES ATLAS

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Dept. 150-J, 115 East 23rd Street,  
New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." No obligations.

Name.....  
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....



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by S. J. E.  
(NAME AND ADDRESS  
SENT UPON REQUEST)



"I had an \$18 a week job in a shoe factory, but desired to make more money and continue my education. I read about Radio opportunities and enrolled with the National Radio Institute."



"The instruction I received was so practical I was soon able to earn \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time servicing Radios. This paid for the N.R.I. Course and led to service work paying for my college education."



"Radio servicing permitted me to attend school and work evenings and week-ends. Upon completing the N.R.I. Course I was made Service Manager at \$40 to \$50 a week, more than twice my shoe factory wage."



"Later the N.R.I. Graduate Service Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio Operator. Now I am Radio Engineer of Station WBSU and connected with Television Station WBSX."



"The N.R.I. Course took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay, enabled me to earn funds for a college education. There's a promising future for thoroughly trained Radio men."



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**Why Many Radio Technicians I Train Make \$30, \$40, \$50 a Week**

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